

桜庭一樹

Kazuki Sakuraba

GOSICK

—ゴシック—ベルゼブブの頭蓋

角川ビーンズ文庫

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GOSICK

—ゴシック—





一弥は、走りながらヴィクトリカの手を
ぎゅうっと握った。強く。

「ぼくは君を助けにきたんだし、
君がぼくを助けてくれたこともある。
ぼくたちは一心同体なんだ。
自分だけ逃げたりなんかしない。
一緒に生きるか、
一緒に死ぬかだ」

水が迫ってくる。

暗い、

紫色に沈む水が。

白い泡と、

月光と。

「ぼくも、いろいろ悩んでいたんだ……
でも、ぼくは君に出逢って……
ひとつだけ思ったことは……
いまこのとき……

大事なもののために……一人の女の子のためだけに
走ることがあつて、いいはずだつて」

一弥は走り続ける。



「わたしは人間に戻った。やわらかなものに。
愛の意味を知るものに。
ゆっくり、ゆっくりと、戻ったのだ……
久城……君がわたしを迎えにきてくれたのだ。
いつも通りに。君が」

ヴィクトリカがことん、と
一弥の肩に小さな頭を預けてきた。
かすかに、花のような匂いがした。
ヴィクトリカの匂いだ、と一弥は思った。



ヴィクトリカ・ド・ブロウ

書物・甘いお菓子・フリルを愛する。謎多き天才美少女。図書館最上階で膨大な書物を読むのが日課。

くじょうみや
久城 一弥

極東の島国よりソヴェール王国に留学してきた、心優しい優等生。聖物で正義感に溢れた、重人一家の三男。



グレイヴィール・ド・ブロウ

ヴィクトリカの異母兄で、地元警察署警部。色男だが、普段はなぜかドリルのような奇怪な髪型をしている。



アプリル・ブラッドリー

英国から学園に留学してきた怪談好きの美少女。冒険家サー・ブラッドリーの孫娘。



セシル先生

一弥とヴィクトリカのクラス担任教師。大きな丸眼鏡が印象的な童話の女性。

CHARACTERS

コルデリア・ギャロ ……ヴィクトリカの実母。

ブライアン・ロスコー ……謎の人物で奇術師。

ライモン・ハント ……役人。

イアーゴ ……修道士、奇跡認定士。

ミシェール ……看護婦。

カーミラ ……双子の老姉妹の姉。

モレラ ……双子の老姉妹の妹。

ジュピター・ロジェ

……ソヴェール王国科学アカデミーの主宰者。

GOSICK

— ゴ シ ッ ク —

イラスト / 武田日向

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And while the queen was sewing and looking out of the window at the snow, she pricked her finger with the needle, and three drops of blood fell upon the snow. And the red looked pretty upon the white snow, and she thought to herself, “Would that I had a child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood of the window-frame.”

Soon after that she had a little daughter.

—*The Brothers Grimm*, Snow White

Prologue: The Crashing of the Virgin

Beelzebub's Skull, December 10, 1914.

The night sea was calm, as though the world was devoid of any horrible conflict. Frothing waves crashed and retreated.

On the boundary between the dark purple night sky and the black sea, there floated what seemed like an odd artificial island. A warship. Waves crashed and retreated. Crashed and retreated. Abruptly the sea was partitioned by a high wall—a huge sluice gate. Closed at high tides, it stood tall between the dark sea and the pale, shimmering beach.

The sandy beach was bathed in moonlight, glimmering ominously as each grain reflected the light from above. Waves crashed and retreated. Crashed and retreated repeatedly. At the edge of the sandy beach, there sat another mass, like a warship, black as darkness.

Everyone in the country knew it as a man-made fortress called Beelzebub's Skull. Shaped like the head of a giant fly, it stood stolidly on a sandy beach against the backdrop of the Milky Way.

And apart from the twinkling little stars in the night sky, a strange sound, like the buzzing of insects, but an artificial one, was growing louder.

The sound was coming closer and closer.

To Beelzebub's Skull.

Soon it filled the night sky. It was a swarm of black, ruggedly-designed fighter planes, approaching from the distant skies.

Light flashed toward Beelzebub's Skull. The bombing had begun.

1914.

It was the year when the conflict that would later be dubbed the Great War began, a war that triggered major changes across the globe, shaking the foundations of the world.

Shells roared, and red flashes streaked across the night sky. A swarm of lights shot toward the fortress. A small silhouette rushed out of the fortress, stopped as the lights rained down on them, and toppled onto the shimmering beach. It was a young woman in a white nursing uniform.

Other women in the same attire rushing toward her were also struck by the red flashes and fell on top of each other, motionless.

“How dare you!” one of the fallen women cursed. Her blue eyes wide open, she turned to the night sky. “There’s only the injured and nurses here. This is not a military base. Curse you Germans!”

With trembling hands, she clutched the rosary hanging from her chest and repeated the words over and over. The rosary was stained red with her blood and that of her colleagues. The fighter planes flew away, circled around, and came soaring back.

“Curse you.”

The young nurses, bleeding and lying on the sand, mumbled over and over in the sweet voices typical of schoolgirls laughing together in class before the Great War began.

“Curse you.”

“Curse you.”

“Curse you Germans!”

“Curse you.”

They all took out their rosaries and prayed. Holding hands, bathed in their own blood, they repeated.

“Curse you.”

“Curse you.”

“Curse you.”

“Curse you.”

“Curse you.”

“Curse you.”

“Curse you.”

“Curse you.”

“Curse you.”

“Curse you...”

Slowly, their voices grew softer and faded. Some closed their eyes and stopped moving. Some held their friend’s hands, tears streaming down their cheeks. Through the tears, in their dying breath, they murmured.

“Curse... you...”

The swarm of fighter planes was coming closer.

Suddenly, something rose in the purple night sky.

One of the girls gasped. She clutched her bloodstained rosary and held it up to the night sky with quivering hands.

As if encouraged by the girl's prayers, its contours became clearer and clearer. It emerged from the sea and soared far into the night sky, almost as if reaching the moon itself.

It was a huge image of the Virgin Mary.

The girl's voice began to tremble with both gratitude and joy.

Standing over a hundred meters tall, the image of Mary stood out clearly in the night sky. She wore white robes, and her long hair hung down to the sea. Her large eyes were wide open, and even the iris was clearly visible. The image of Mary's face twisted sadly, and tears began streaming from her eyes.

The baby in her white arms was sleeping peacefully.

A fighter plane lost control and collided with another, bursting into orange flames right in front of the weeping Mary, and crashed at sea. The other plane also plunged tip first into the beach. Several fighters went haywire and crashed in the waters. Orange pillars of fire rose like beacons on the beach. The ominous stench of burning oil filled the air. Girls covered in blood chuckled.

Eventually, their laughter faded.

There was not a single plane in the night sky. Most had crashed, and those that remained drifted away into distance at breakneck speed. *Crackle*. The girls were quiet. The image of the Virgin Mary was still floating in the air. She looked down at the humans with a face full of sorrow.

The girls had passed away, smiles on their faces, their eyes turned to the sky.

Soon, other girls bolted out of Beelzebub's Skull to help their fallen colleagues. They cried and screamed and howled to the night sky as they held their friends in their arms.

There was nothing more high above.

No fighter planes. No apparition of the Virgin Mary.

Only stars, twinkling for eternity.

Orange flames crackled on the beach.

Chapter 1: School Without Victorique

It was the last day of a long summer break that passed so slowly it seemed like an eternity.

The dazzling sunlight, still carrying with it the last vestiges of summer, shone on the vast campus of St. Marguerite Academy.

The huge U-shaped school building was surrounded by lawns and flowerbeds that resembled a French-style garden. The white fountain, decorated with elaborate sculptures, stood like a pillar of ice that was melting in the heat, continuously spewing crystal-clear water.

Squirrels scurried across the well-kept lawn. Students dressed in various outfits were chatting in the cozy gazebos that dotted the garden. They were not talking about the second semester classes that would start soon, but how they spent their summer vacations.

A boy was walking along a path a little ways away from the lively chatters, looking around restlessly.

He was of a small and thin build, with jet-black hair, and lonely, jet-black eyes. He walked with his back straight, looking to his right and left. He seemed to be searching for something.

“Victorique, where are you?”

He poked his face behind a flowerbed, peered under a bench, and squinted at the tree tops. As if looking for a missing cat, the dark-haired boy—Kazuya Kujou—wandered around for a while.

“Victorique?” he mumbled, puzzled. “Where on earth did she go? Up until yesterday, I saw her sitting in a gazebo, or under the shade of the tree outside the boys’ dormitory, munching on snacks while reading books.”

Kazuya surveyed the surroundings. His eyes narrowed as he stared at the garden, boisterous with the voices of students of noble descent. While yesterday the academy was filled with silence, this morning it was noisy, almost as if it was a different place altogether.

A moment later, Kazuya nodded to himself. “Maybe she’s in the library,” he murmured. “All right. Let’s check the place out.” He started

walking.

The year is 1924, summer.

The Kingdom of Sauville, a small European country.

An endless expanse of green vineyards sprawled along its border with France. On its border with Italy was a gorgeous summer refuge facing the Mediterranean Sea. A dense green labyrinth of lakes and forests separated it from Switzerland. This small country, long and narrow like an enigmatic corridor, was called the small giant of Western Europe, having survived the last Great War despite being surrounded by numerous powers.

If the Gulf of Lyon facing the Mediterranean Sea was the grand entrance to the kingdom, the Alps were a secret attic hidden in the deepest part of the country. St. Marguerite Academy, standing quietly at the foot of a mountain range, was an educational institution for the children of nobility, boasting a long and grand history, though not as long as that of the kingdom itself.

But after the end of the war, the academy decided to accept students from some allied countries. Brilliant kids came here, carrying their country's prestige with them. One of them, Kazuya Kujou, struggled with life in this foreign country, but he worked hard in his studies, made a few friends, and was just getting on track in his life as an international student.

One of the friends Kazuya made was a bright and energetic international student from England, Avril Bradley.

And the other was an enigmatic, golden, mystical girl with a wicked tongue. Surrounded by frills and books, she possessed a bizarre intellect—Victorique de Blois.

Before he knew it, Kazuya's life as an international student had begun to revolve around this mysterious girl.

“Victorique? Where are you? Maybe she's back to hiding in the library 'cause the students are back from vacation.”

St. Marguerite Grand Library, a gray stone tower hidden at the far end of the academy's spacious campus, stood in silence, as it had for the past three hundred years.

Though one of the finest halls of knowledge in Europe, not many people knew of its existence due to the academy's secretive policy. Its walls were

discolored from exposure to the elements. Rarely did anyone enter the building.

Kazuya opened the small leather door and entered the library.

“Victorique?”

Inside, bookshelves were built into the walls, filled with books all the way up to the ceiling far above, where majestic religious paintings glistened. A labyrinthine set of narrow wooden staircases connected the bookshelves like countless intertwined snakes.

Kazuya stopped and peered far above. He searched for the familiar golden glimmer of what would seem like the tail of some mysterious ancient creature. He thought he saw a faint glint, but the light of the morning sun streaming through the window near the ceiling obscured his vision.

Kazuya sighed. “Hello? Are you there? Who am I kidding... You never answer even when you’re around. I guess I don’t have much of a choice but to climb up there,” he mumbled.

He straightened his posture and began ascending the complex, serpentine stairs with measured footsteps.

Up.

And up.

Still going up.

“That little... Why don’t you say something when you go to a different spot? This school is huge, and since you’re small, despite all the puffy frills, finding you is a pain.” Anger flared within him, and he began shaking his fist. “You have a sharp tongue, you’re fickle, and you always make me mad. Why are you so mean? Are you mean to everyone? Or just me? Victorique! Hello—Huh?”

When Kazuya finally reached the top, he stopped and looked around.

Situated at the very top of the library tower was a lush conservatory, where garish tropical flowers grew thickly. A cool, late-summer breeze blew through the small window, shaking the vibrant foliage.

Complex books and small pink macaroons were scattered on the staircase landing. Perplexed, Kazuya glanced around at the empty conservatory, then slowly approached the spot where the books and candies lay, got down on one knee, and began studying the scene.

Kazuya pointed to an empty space in the middle of the floor. “Based on the angle of the books and the location of the macaroons, this is where she sat. She was facing this way while reading, cursing as usual while scattering candy all around.”

His eyes narrowed. “But she’s not here now. What happened? Ah!”

He found a white ceramic pipe lying among the books. He picked it up and brought it closer to his face, studying it intently that his eyes almost crossed.

“It’s Victorique’s pipe. The one she uses to blow smoke into my face. And then she looks pleased when she sees me coughing. It’s definitely her pipe. But what’s it doing here?”

Kazuya stood up. Wondering where Victorique went, he searched deeper in the conservatory, the elevator hall, and the small square chest on the staircase landing—Victorique’s hiding place.

Fear suddenly gripped his heart. After examining the conservatory one more time, Kazuya hurried down the stairs. His hands, clutching Victorique’s pipe to his chest, were shaking.

He ran down the stairs, losing his usual straight posture.

“Kujou...”

That day, when summer break was right around the corner, the day she revealed the identity of the alchemist Leviathan. He recalled the words Victorique said as they walked in the garden hand-in-hand.

“You can’t find me?”

Victorique’s husky voice was filled with sorrow.

Clear, deep-green eyes, sometimes seemingly mature, like a person who had lived a hundred years.

Her hair, like a golden veil, hanging down to the floor, sometimes billowing in anger.

As Kazuya rushed down the stairs, he remembered his reply.

“Not really.”

“It takes a little bit of time, but I’ll always find you.”

“Like I did just now.”

As soon as he made it down to the first floor, Kazuya left the St. Marguerite Grand Library and walked down the pathway.

The gardens glistened in the summer morning sun, the flowerbeds and verdant lawns dazzling to the eyes.

A girl with short, blonde hair that was tanned to a light brown, was coming from the other side—Avril Bradley. Walking briskly with a large suitcase, she stopped and looked at Kazuya. She was about to call out to him, but when she noticed that he was in a hurry, she thought better of it.

Kazuya stopped at the entrance to the flowerbed maze, then started marching through the complex garden.

Maybe I'm just overthinking things... She's fickle, after all... Maybe a sudden thought came to her and she went somewhere. She was so absorbed in her thoughts that she left her precious pipe behind... I'm sure that's it.

He continued onward. Frowning anxiously, Kazuya made it through the flowerbed and arrived at a small house resembling an elaborate dollhouse.

“Victorique?” he called, scurrying to the window she always sat at.

The window was ajar. He peered inside. What was usually a house full of books, candy, and pretty furniture looked dark and empty, as if no one had lived there for a while.

“Victorique? Are you there? Where did you go... Victorique!”

“She’s not here, Kujou,” came a voice.

Kazuya looked up.

Inside the dim house, a door opened, and a person emerged. She had large round glasses and curly brown hair. Her brown eyes were swollen red.

It was Ms. Cecile.

The inside of the small house was empty, and dark, despite it being morning. As Kazuya stared through the window, Ms. Cecile lumbered out of the room. The faint sound of shoes turning toward the front door echoed loudly in the empty house. There was a loud thud; she seemed to have tripped. Then she got up and continued walking.

A moment later, Ms. Cecile stepped out the front door, rubbing her elbow painfully. She inserted a cute little key into the brass doorknob and turned it. She looked crestfallen.

“What happened to Victorique?” Kazuya asked. “I saw her lying around under some trees yesterday.”

Ms. Cecile sniveled. She frowned, holding back tears.

“Her father’s men came to pick her up last night,” she replied.

“You mean Marquis de Blois?”

“They’re transferring her temporarily to a monastery far from here.”

Ms. Cecile didn't say much otherwise. She looked up at the tiny candy house, and sighed.

"Why?!" Kazuya exclaimed. He couldn't believe what he just heard. "This is all too sudden. Did she do something?"

"It all happened so quickly that I couldn't get a grasp of the situation. But her coming to the academy was just as sudden too. It's what her father always does, apparently. I was shocked when they came for her in the middle of the night. I kicked up a lot of fuss."

"But why..."

"I have a letter for you, though."

"A letter?!"

Ms. Cecile removed her round glasses, wiped away her tears, and put them back on again. She then carefully produced a piece of folded paper from her breast pocket.

Kazuya took it with shaky hands. It was a beautiful writing paper, a pale purple color with numerous rose patterns. There was only one sheet of paper.

"They dragged her here from the library, but Victorique told them to give her a bit of time," Ms. Cecile murmured. She pointed to a lovely table with jade ornaments that was visible from the window, and wiped another tear. "She walked over to that table and started writing a letter to you. The grown men with her couldn't stop her. They just waited silently for her to finish writing it. She was desperate. She handed it to me with tears in her eyes. She was then taken out the front door and put on a big, black carriage. They even blindfolded her."

Ms. Cecile pressed the letter to Kazuya's chest, then disappeared into the flowerbeds, hiding her tears.

Kazuya looked back at the candy house. A white quill pen and a round, ruby-colored ink jar were left strewn on the pretty table in the dark room. The small chair that came with the table lay toppled on the floor.

Kazuya just stared at the room, his lips tightly pursed. His eyes were grim, tinged with anger and sadness. His lips quivered. Wearing a forbidding look, he headed for the flowerbed.

The light of the morning sun fell on him.

Slowly, Kazuya opened the letter.

Outside the flowerbed maze, a cheerful girl with short blonde hair was sitting on a suitcase on the ground, her arms and legs tanned from time spent under the summer sun. Her name was Avril Bradely, an international student like Kazuya, who had finally returned from a long summer vacation in the Mediterranean. She was dressed in a white blouse and a crisp, striped pleated skirt. There were tan marks on her shoulders caused by her swimsuit.

Her blue eyes, bright as the clear sky, were wide open, watching the exit to the maze vigilantly.

“I’m sure he disappeared around here somewhere,” she mumbled. “We haven’t seen each other in a while, and I’ve got a ton of ghost stories to share. Why’s he taking so long?”

She stamped her long, graceful legs on the ground, as if eager to see him as soon as possible.

“Kujou! Kujoooouu! Oh, there he is!”

Avril bolted upright.

Kazuya came out of the flowerbeds, her face even grimmer than earlier. He had his back straight, and he was clutching something that looked like a purple letter paper in his right hand. He was coming her way.

“Ku... jou...?”

“Argh, she pisses me off so much!” Kazuya snapped. He was uncharacteristically emotional.

Avril gave a start. “Wh-What’s wrong?” she asked, puzzled. “Oh, long time no see, by the way.”

“Who are you calling a scoundrel?!”

“Huh?”

Kazuya strode down the pathway. Avril quickly turned and pulled her suitcase, following him.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m not rude, a brute, a halfwit, a simpleton, or tone-deaf. And I most certainly am not a reaper! I’d love to say something back, but she’s no longer here. What are you gonna do about this, Victorique?!”

Avril’s cheeks puffed up. “Oh, you’re talking about Victorique... I was worried for nothing!”

“Oh, Avril. Welcome back. How was the Mediterranean? Did you have fun? I’ll carry your luggage for you.”

Kazuya courteously took Avril's suitcase and pulled it along. He heaved a sigh as he walked.

"Her last letter to me... One she wrote after intimidating grown men..."

The suitcase rattled loudly behind Kazuya. Avril still looked sulky.

"Why is it nothing but insults?! That slanderer! Demon! And this doesn't even qualify as a letter! Where are the sentences?! It's just individual words. Idiot, scoundrel, tone-deaf, brute, simpleton. Is that what you really wanted to tell me? And in huge letters too! Darn it... I guess you'll always be a meanie."

"What's going on?" Avril asked wearily. "Did you have a fight with her again?"

Kazuya shook his head as they walked past the glistening fountain.

The wind tousled Kazuya's black hair forlornly. Avril's skirt billowed.

"What's wrong, then?" she asked.

"She's... gone." Kazuya's voice was faint.

"What?"

"Victorique went somewhere far away."

A look of surprise and sadness dawned on Avril's face. Her expression changed again. She looked back at the huge gray tower in the distance—the library, the hall of knowledge that housed the little girl that weighed heavily on her mind.

Avril was silent for a while. Then she peered into Kazuya's face.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Yeah... Well, actually..." He pursed his lips.

Kazuya stopped and let go of the suitcase. With both hands, he carefully folded the letter from Victorique, a letter that contained nothing but insults written in huge letters. He said nothing. He did not utter a word. He took out a notebook from his breast pocket, and with a tender, loving hand, he gently tucked the light purple, rose-patterned piece of paper between the pages.

Also neatly folded and tucked away in the notebook was the first letter he had received from Victorique earlier in the summer. A small perfumed piece of paper with a pattern of roses in a birdcage. It contained only the word "Idiot".

Kazuya put his notebook back in his breast pocket and pursed his lips again. Avril looked more and more worried.

It was the last day of summer vacation.

A bright, warm morning.

The campus was filled with the voices of happy students still on vacation mode. On the lawn, in the gazebos, and in the hallways and rooms of the dormitories.

A wind blew, rustling the flowers in full bloom.

Summer break was over.

With the second semester starting, students returned to their busy school life, waking up in the morning, having breakfast in the dorms, and attending classes.

The sun was getting milder as autumn approached. The verdant foliage in the garden had begun to fade a little, and the wind became cooler and dry. Among the students attending classes at the academy, Kazuya was particularly earnest, wearing a steely expression. He had studied and reviewed his lessons, and no matter what questions were thrown at him, he answered without hesitation.

Avril was watching Kazuya from a seat some distance away.

There's something off about him...

Her eyes went to the empty seat in front of her—the seat of Victorique de Blois, a girl who never attended classes.

All he does is study... Like some imperial soldier.

She frowned.

He rarely smiles. It's not fun.

She glanced at the homeroom teacher, Ms. Cecile. For some curious reason, she barely made eye contact with Kazuya.

Avril breathed another sigh. *What happened? I'm completely clueless.*

Once class was over, Avril stared despondently outside the window. She could see Kazuya in the distance, hurrying through the garden toward the boys' dormitory. He looked like a lone soldier marching, not sparing even a glance at the lovely lawn, or the flowers blooming around him.

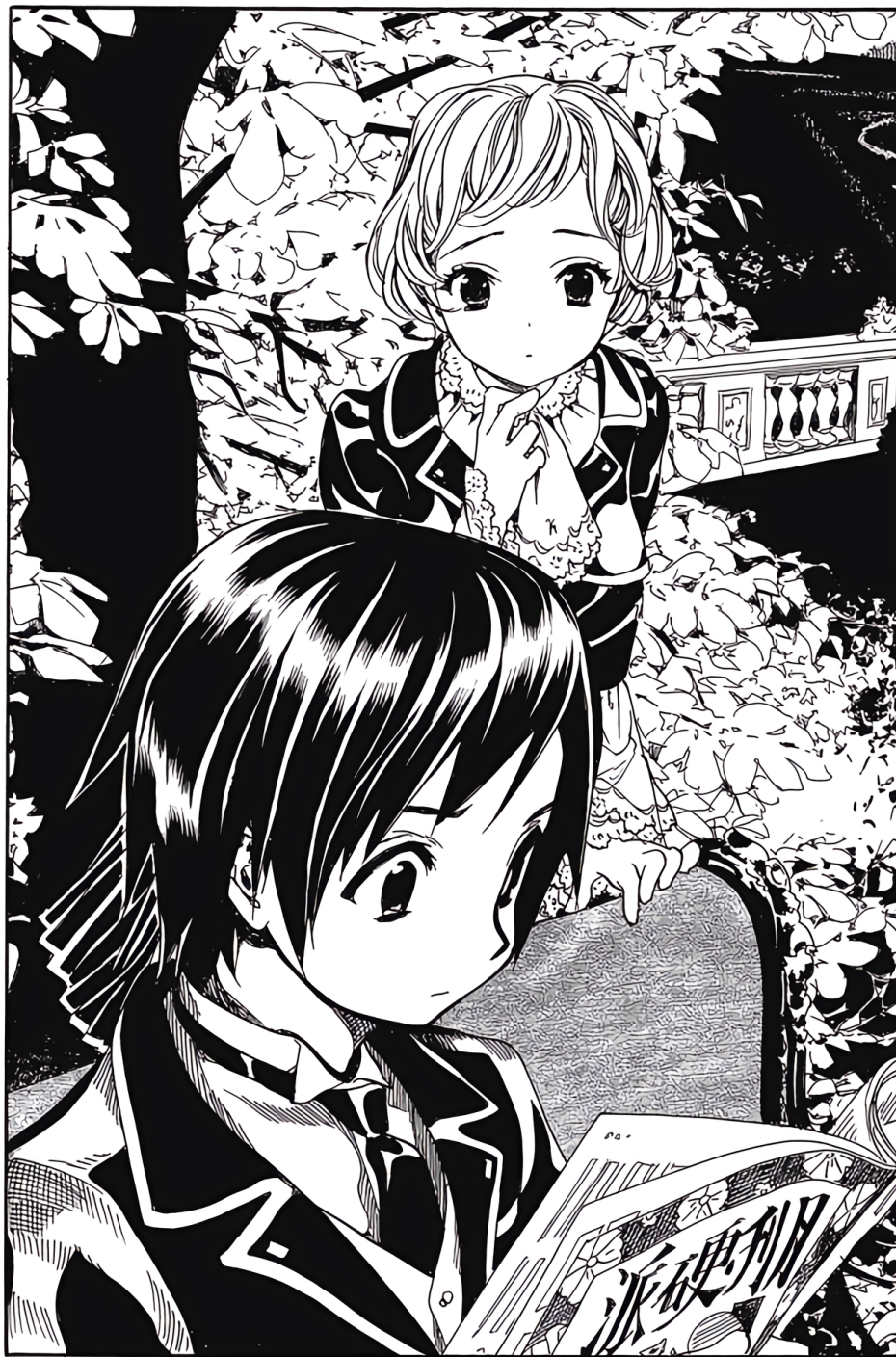
Halfway through the week.

The wind was cooler now, and the green trees were changing to the soft colors of autumn. The colorful flowers in the garden fluttered whenever a cool, damp breeze whistled past, scattering their vibrant petals on the grass.

“Um, Kujou?” Avril called gingerly as she approached him.

Kazuya was sitting on a bench on the lawn, reading a copy of Tough Guys Monthly. It was evening, and students were dispersed around the garden, chatting merrily.

“What are you reading?” Avril asked, peering from behind the bench.



“Hmm?” Kazuya looked up. “Oh. It’s Tough Guys Monthly,” he said with a smile. “My oldest brother sends a copy every month from my country. It contains obtrusive tips on how a man should live his life. I’m not really a fan of it.”

“R-Really?” Avril blinked. “Then why are you reading it?”

She sat down next to him and peered at the contents. A cool breeze blew, ruffling Avril’s short blonde hair. A pink petal landed softly on her milky nape, then slowly rolled down her neck and fell to the grass.

“I’m not sure,” Kazuya murmured sadly.

“Hmm?”

Pulling himself together, Kazuya put on a smile. “It says things like, ‘A man should not act on personal emotions or take life for granted.’ Also ‘Lay down your life for your country. To do so, you must train.’ And all that. Basically similar to the stuff that my brother writes in his letters. In his letters, he’s even more rigid. ‘As the world changes by the minute, you should study hard and become a fine man who will serve his country.’ He never changes.”

“I see...”

“Also, my other brother sends me fascinating science magazines. And my sister sends me knitting magazines, which are also interesting. They keep my mind off of things.”

“Ahuh.”

Realizing she’d been saying nothing but offhanded replies, Avril blushed a little. She felt restless, looking to the right, to the left, up. She fiddled with the hem of her skirt.

I wish I had something interesting to share. A fun topic that would cheer him up... Let’s see...

She snuck a glance at Kazuya. He was just turning his gaze back to the magazine.

“Kujou, have you ever heard of the spirit world radio?” Avril quickly asked.

“Nope. What is that?”

Avril’s face lit up. “Well... There’s this supposedly empty room with a radio that suddenly turns on in the middle of the night. It picks up the voices of the dead from the afterlife and plays them. The voices of the damned mingle with grating static...”

Avril's cheerful voice rolled across the garden.

Another wind blew, scattering golden petals on the grass and the crystal-clear waters of the fountain.

Several more days passed.

It was evening, and weekend was just around the corner. The weather was fine. Warm rays of sunlight fell on the dreary flower beds.

"Then the ghost came into the room and shouted. 'I'm going to curse you to death!'"

"Ahuh, ahuh."

Sitting on a bench, Kazuya nodded with half-open eyes. Avril, sitting next to him, was enthusiastically sharing more ghost stories.

Kazuya looked at the textbook on his lap. His head drooped, and he fell asleep.

Avril, unaware, kept on talking. *He seems to be feeling better. He's acting normal in class, so I guess he's back to the usual Kujou?*

After finishing her story, she poked Kazuya. "So, Kujou."

Kazuya raised his head. "I wasn't sleeping."

"Wanna go to the village this weekend? Classes have started, so I have to buy school supplies and stuff. I thought it would be more fun if we went together."

"Ahuh..." Kazuya replied absently.

Humongous white clouds rolled in, blotting out the evening sky. The sun faded, and dark shadows fell on the grass. Feeling chilly, Kazuya let out a small sneeze. Then he stood up, straightened his back, and started walking.

Avril remained on the bench as she watched him go.

Is he actually feeling better?

The orange glow of the setting sun slipped through the rifts between the clouds. In the distance, Kazuya tripped over nothing. Avril got up from the bench and brushed the dust off her skirt, unaware of Kazuya's little incident. Kazuya resumed walking. Avril also started marching to the opposite direction.

The wind blew again, sending golden petals from the flower beds dancing around Avril's slim figure, before drifting to the ground.

Ms. Cecile was coming from up ahead. She appeared absentminded as well, her eyes still swollen red. Her curly brown hair that hung to her

shoulders was a mess. A tuft of it was standing up at a weird angle.

“Oh, Avril.”

“Teach. Is that bed hair?”

“Huh? O-Oh, no, no. Just a new hairstyle. It’s what’s popular in Saubreme right now.”

Twiddling with her hair, Ms. Cecile tripped on the bench and fell. The stack of papers that she was carrying hovered in the cool autumn breeze, flying all over the garden. Avril squealed. Bending her long, graceful legs, she jumped up and caught the printouts mid-air.

“Thank you, Avril.”

“Two more, and that’s all of them. Is something wrong, Teach?” Avril asked.

Ms. Cecile shook her head, and glanced at Kazuya far in the distance. “You were talking to Kujou just now, weren’t you? How was he? Is he feeling down, or does he seem out of it?”

“It felt like that earlier this week, but he seemed like the usual Kujou today,” she replied brightly.

Ms. Cecile inclined her head. “Is that so?”

“Yeah. We were chatting normally. Hmm...?” She realized that she was mostly the one doing the talking. She cocked her head in the same direction as Ms. Cecile’s, looking doubtful. “I-I’m not sure anymore.”

For a while, the two just stared at each other.

A few petals fell on the papers that Ms. Cecile was holding.

A lone squirrel scurried past them.

Weekend. Morning.

Avril woke up and got dressed for the day. She combed her short hair, put on her favorite polka-dot blouse and flared skirt, and carried a small round bag. She rushed out of the girls’ dormitory and into the vast gardens of St. Marguerite Academy.

On the other side of the flowerbeds, she spotted a golden, pointed object for a moment. Avril stopped and narrowed her eyes. The flowers in the flowerbed were a little shorter than Avril, but she could no longer see what she saw, even when standing on tiptoe. Avril brushed it aside and scurried away again in search of Kazuya.

Kujou seems to be acting differently than usual...

Avril looked around the garden and found Kazuya sitting alone in a gazebo in the distance.

I'm sure he'll cheer up once we have some fun in the village, she thought as she made his way toward him. It's not like him to be depressed all the time...

As she got closer, she tried calling for him.

“O-Ouch!”

But something sharp poked the back of her head. Avril shrieked and turned around, clutching her head with both hands.

Two golden drills were glistening in the morning sun.

Kazuya, sitting in the gazebo, was holding a white ceramic pipe in his hand. He kept fiddling with it, pretending to blow on it, or holding it in the palm of his hand and just staring at it. When he heard people arguing nearby, he lifted his head.

“Ouch! Please be more careful, Inspector. You have two hazardous things on your head!”

“I’m still getting used to it. It hasn’t been long since this thing split into two.”

“That doesn’t mean you can just poke a girl’s head with it. I could have you arrested!”

“It’s only hair.”

“It’s a deadly weapon! It really hurt!”

Kazuya turned his gaze to the commotion. Outside the gazebo, Avril and someone that looked like Inspector Grevil de Blois were arguing about something. Inspector Blois was dressed impeccably as usual—glimmering silver silk blouse, silver cufflinks, and tight-fitting riding pants.

Kazuya got up. “What’s the mat... ter...?”

Inspector Blois turned around, and Kazuya let out a squeal.

“Stop screaming,” Inspector Blois said. “Come here.”

“No way! Not until you explain what’s going on with your head!”

“Things happened.”

The Inspector’s golden, drill-shaped hair was divided into two, one on top of the other. The space between the drills looked like the mouth of a crocodile with its jaws wide open, an eerie golden darkness that threatened to swallow Kazuya as he studied it.

“What in the world happened?” Kazuya asked as the inspector dragged him along.

“Nothing.”

“So you came here to make me laugh?”

“And why would I do that? No. I said things happened. Right at the end of summer.”

“Okay...”

“With Jacqueline...”

“Oh? Wh-What happened?”

“Hush. Keep your mouth shut. Stop thinking about stupid things and just continue walking. Left, right, left, right. If you ask questions, I will arrest you. Do you understand?”

“Talk about tyrannical,” Kazuya mumbled as he walked across the grass.

He looked back at Avril and waved. “See you later, Avril.”

“What?! What about our plan to go shopping?”

“You can go shopping later,” Inspector Blois huffed and shoed Avril away.

Miffed, Avril stuck her tongue out at the Inspector once he had his back turned.

Inspector Blois dragged Kazuya somewhere, no questions asked.

Kazuya looked up at the two drills glistening under the morning sun.

“Inspector,” he murmured. “Where’d they take Victorique?”

“Beelzebub’s Skull,” Inspector Blois answered promptly.

A wind whistled past, tousling Kazuya’s black hair. The inspector’s hair, however, remained still. Leaves rustled.

Surprised by the inspector’s reply, Kazuya looked up at the drills again.

“Stop staring at my head!”

“I can’t help it. It draws attention. So what’s this Beelzebub’s Skull?”

“It’s a monastery in Lithuania.” Another quick response. “Lithuania and Sauville have been allies for a long time. Since the days when the old powers still ruled Europe. It’s supposed to be a place for nuns to live quietly, the best place to keep the little Gray Wolf in check. It’s located right by the sea. The nunnery closes its sluice gates when the tide rises to prevent water from entering. It’s far from any human settlement, with only one unmanned station nearby. The rest of the area is closed off by the dark sea. A lone small wolf would not be able to escape.”

Kazuya bit his lip. "And that's where Victorique is..." He glared at the inspector's two drills. "But why? Why all of a sudden?"

The inspector turned his eyes away from Kazuya's fiery gaze. "We needed to lure a certain person for a certain purpose. For that, we absolutely needed that little Gray Wolf."

"A certain person? Who?"

"I can't tell you," the inspector replied in a low voice. "But the little Gray Wolf is weakening more rapidly than we expected."

"What?!"

"We must keep it alive for the next storm. In exchange for its bizarre and vast intellect, she was given a small, weak, and fragile body. I'll say it again, Kujou. We don't want it running around freely, but we can't let it die either."

"You can't just...!" Kazuya raised his voice. "Is she... Is she all right?"

The inspector didn't answer. He just kept pulling on Kazuya. Eventually, the boy realized that the inspector was headed toward the flowerbed maze that hid a small candy house. Kazuya gave the inspector's head an inquisitive look.

"We received word from the monastery that it doesn't eat, doesn't read, or even howl. For a week now, it has done nothing but sit in a corner of the monastery like a figurine. It doesn't eat, speak, and just gets weaker and weaker. If this goes on, a tiny breeze might be enough to extinguish the remaining embers of her life."

Kazuya hung his head, shocked.

They made their way through the maze and arrived at Victorique's dollhouse. Ms. Cecile was there, just about to unlock the door. Hearing footsteps, she turned around to see Kazuya and Inspector Blois. She gave a smile of relief.

"Kujou," she said.

"Teach."

"Hurry up and open the door," the inspector said irritably.

Ms. Cecile did as told, and the three entered the house.

A small house, dim even in the morning.

Swinging his drill-shaped hair from left to right, the inspector said, "I was thinking of sending her stuff to the monastery. Help me pack up, Kujou."

Kazuya said nothing.

“She may be my sister, but she’s an aberration who can only live under certain conditions. Perhaps she’s a much weaker creature than we thought... Take this.”

Inspector Blois found a huge empty suitcase and tossed it toward Kazuya, who quickly caught it. Kazuya kept her head down for a while, silent. Biting his lip, he stared at the suitcase. Then he placed it on the floor and rose to his feet.

Kazuya gave Inspector Blois a sharp gaze. “Inspector, I...” He raised his voice. “I’m going to get Victorique.”

“Oh?” Inspector Blois looked a little relieved.

Kazuya kept his eyes on the man. “But I’m not doing it for you or your father. Or anyone else, for that matter. I’m her friend, and I’m worried about her. That’s why I’m going.”

Inspector Blois suddenly turned. Kazuya swiftly took a step back, preventing the dangerous drills from stabbing him. In the dark room, Kazuya Kujou, a foreign student from a small country in the Orient, and the drill-headed inspector, the heir apparent of the de Blois family, stared each other down.

Kazuya never pulled his eyes away from the drills. “I...”

The inspector sniffed audibly. “Get ready, then.”

“Inspector, I...”

They held each other’s gaze.

The words of Brian Roscoe, the enigmatic magician with upturned green eyes, a sinister man with flaming red hair, came to Kazuya’s mind.

“Keep an eye out for the transfer.”

“Can you protect her with what measly power you have?”

Ms. Cecile, standing in the corner, stared at Kazuya and the inspector for a while. She was stamping her feet anxiously, her gaze darting between the two.

“You can fight later,” she rebuked. “For now, you go and get her back, Kujou.”

Kazuya snapped back to his senses. “R-Right!” he said, nodding.

Inspector Blois snorted.

Ms. Cecile pointed to the suitcase. “Let’s pack her stuff. Victorique didn’t bring proper clothes with her.”

“Not even clothes?” Kazuya said. “The Victorique who carried ridiculously large luggage like she was going for a round-the-world trip when she’s really just gone for one night? I guess this huge suitcase being here is proof enough.”

“She used the time to pack to write a letter to you instead.”

“Uh...”

“She must have had something very important to tell you,” Ms. Cecile mumbled sadly.

Kazuya fell silent, wearing an awkward look.

“You little, foul-mouthed, mean, snarky machine. I thought you valued books, frills, and candy more than life itself. Why did you spend all your time writing crap about me instead of packing those things? Are you actually stupid?”

Mumbling to the absent Victorique, Kazuya scuttled around the house, busily packing stuff for Victorique. Difficult books. A jar filled with pink and orange macaroons. Chocolate bonbons. Candy bars shaped like rabbits and birds. Raspberry jam cookies. A pile of sparkling marron glaces. Round scones filled with black currants.

When he finished packing them all, Kazuya reached for the jade-green, glossy, closet door and opened it. Frilly and lacy dresses popped out and crashed down on Kazuya like a flock of swans.

Kazuya yelped as he fell on his backside. There were all sorts of dresses: ruffled and adorned with snow-white fur, ruby-colored of glossy velour, pink with puffy sleeves, adorned with countless corsages of tiny roses. There were also miniature gobelin hats, tiny ballet shoes with shiny pearl buttons, hoop skirt to puff out dresses, and bloomers with lots of decorative embroidery.

Reminded of Victorique, Kazuya’s face went blank. Then he slowly stood up and began picking up the dresses one by one and stuffing them into the suitcase. As if picking up memories of the past.

Inspector Blois stared at him irritably, until eventually he couldn’t take it anymore. “No!” he snapped. “That hoopskirt right there is specially-designed to puff up that dress. Also, wearing that ruffled blouse under that dress right there will accentuate the ornaments on the sleeves. And

remember, you pair it with these flowery high heels. And the hat... Oh, this one!"

"Stop being so fussy, Inspector."

"You're an uncultured man who knows nothing about dresses. I have to be completely thorough."

Kazuya looked up and shot the inspector a glare. "I'm the one picking her up. You stay there with your mouth shut and add more drills to your head instead."

The inspector went quiet. Leaning against the wall, he watched Kazuya pack up. He was fidgety, but did not say a word.



“It’s that little devil who made me do this,” the inspector grumbled softly. “Why would I want this hard-to-maintain hairdo?”

Once he was done packing, Kazuya closed the suitcase and locked it.

Quietly he rose to his feet. “I’m off, then,” he said to both Ms. Cecile and Inspector Blois.

“Kujou.” The inspector pulled something out of his pocket. It was a long, black envelope.

Kazuya opened it and found a thin, black sheet of paper inside. It read: “Invitation to Phantasmagoria” in English.

“What’s this?” Kazuya asked.

“The monastery normally doesn’t allow outsiders. But tomorrow night, if you have this, you can get in.”

“What kind of a place is this Beelzebub’s Skull?”

“You’ll know when you get there. I’m counting on you, boy.”

Inspector Blois pointed his cannon-like hair at Kazuya and nodded.

Weekend at St. Marguerite Academy was sunny, the weather pleasant. Students were hanging out in their favorite spots as usual, cheerfully talking about their long summer vacations. Their voices sounded like the chirping of birds.

From the gazebos. From the benches. From the cozy lawns.

In the corner of St. Marguerite Academy was a mysterious maze of flowerbeds, where students dared not to enter lest they got lost inside.

Kazuya stepped out of the maze, dragging a huge suitcase across the pathway.

Slowly, one step at a time, he lumbered away from the din of merry conversations.

Avril, who was talking with her classmates in a gazebo, spotted him. She wore a curious expression, wondering where he was headed.

Kazuya eventually arrived at the academy’s exit, the huge main gate, adorned with gleaming scrollwork. He passed through the gate and left the academy, right at the end of summer.

The wind blew, shaking the leaves on the trees. The water from the fountain flowed endlessly. Outside the main gate, a quiet gravel road leading to the village stretched into the distance.

The village's small station was quiet. Unlike a week ago, when the station was catering to throngs of students returning from vacation, there weren't many passengers in the small building with its cute triangular roof, nor in the steam locomotive that entered the platform with a cloud of smoke.

Carrying his huge suitcase, Kazuya jumped onto the train and breathed a sigh of relief. He walked down the aisle, found an empty compartment, entered, and sat down.

The huge suitcase was sitting pompously at his side, as though mimicking its owner's personality. Kazuya leaned against the suitcase and stared out the window.

The dazzling green vineyards moved further and further away as the train headed for Saubreme, the capital of the Kingdom of Sauville. Outside, the scenery gradually changed from rural to urban. An hour passed, then two. Soon, the train became a little more crowded.

"May I?" A young mother with a little girl asked as she entered the compartment. When she noticed that Kazuya was an oriental, her face hardened cautiously.

"Of course, Madam," Kazuya replied politely.

The young mother sat down on the seat across from him. The little girl with her climbed onto the seat, her fluffy kid's dress fluttering. She held onto the window frame and stared at the scenery outside, as though it was her first time being on a train.

Her brown eyes widened. She squeezed her tiny, pudgy hands.

The mother opened the window, and the girl's long brown hair billowed. She gazed at the passing landscapes, her little mouth gaping open. The wind blew the white bonnet off her head and fell onto Kazuya's lap. He picked it up and gently placed it on the girl's head.

Slowly, he pulled his eyes from the girl.

The whistle blew.

The young mother took out a handkerchief and handed it to Kazuya. Kazuya whispered a word of thanks and wiped his eyes in embarrassment.

He sniffed.

Tears were flowing.

"You must have come from far away," the lady said.

"I-I did..."

“Were you reminded of your sister?”

“No. I just... Your little daughter reminded me of someone.”

The young mother smiled as Kazuya returned the handkerchief. She then took the girl, who had started rubbing her eyes drowsily, in both hands and placed her on her lap. The girl looked up at Kazuya and smiled.

The train arrived at the capital, Saubreme.

Located in the center of Saubreme was Charles de Gillet train station, where passengers and porters in red uniforms streamed along the steel bridge connecting the dozens of platforms. Up above was a glass ceiling, supported by gigantic black pillars of brick.

Kazuya passed the time with a glass of milk at a large café. Then he boarded the Old Masquerade, a train bound for Lithuania, which finally entered the platform in the evening.

A sleeper express train that ran across Western Europe, the Old Masquerade consisted of five cars, with spacious private compartments on the first-class coaches that contained two beds each. The conductor checked for the names, faces, and passports of the passengers lining up on the platform, while porters carried their large suitcases.

In front of Kazuya was a quiet-looking girl of about the same age. She was quite pretty, with black hair, dark-blue eyes, and pasty skin. Kazuya helped her with her heavy luggage.

“Thank you,” the girl murmured.

Behind Kazuya stood a thin man who appeared to be in his mid-twenties. He was dressed primly in a suit, and his brown hair was neatly combed. He was a serious-looking young man with nondescript features.

As the passengers boarded the train, the whistle sounded. A short time later, the iron doors were closed from the outside.

Kazuya entered his own coach and placed the huge suitcase next to his bed. He sighed. As he settled down on the chair, he heard something slamming the door from the corridor, followed by a snarl.

“Wh-What’s wrong?”

Kazuya opened the door and saw an old man with gray hair and a white beard, about seventy years old, standing by the corridor. His clothes and shoes were not exactly of the finest quality, but they were pristine nonetheless. Wrinkles partly covered his green eyes. He was of thin build.

Apparently, he had slammed his huge luggage against the door. He was grumbling under his breath.

“Are you all right?” Kazuya asked.

The old man sniffed audibly. “If you’re worried, then give me a hand, oriental.”

“That’s uncalled for,” Kazuya huffed. “So where’s your coach?”

Kazuya took his luggage and carried it into the man’s room anyway. Mumbling something, the old man reached into his pocket to give Kazuya some coins, to which the boy refused. Again, he mumbled.

“Where are you headed?” Kazuya asked casually as he proceeded to leave.

The old man frowned, his wrinkly face clouding over. Kazuya’s feet froze.

“To Beelzebub’s Skull, oriental boy.”

Kazuya and the old man made their way to the lounge of the moving train. Located between the first and second-class cars, it was filled with opulent art deco tables and chairs, couches, and oriental flower vases.

The car was darkly lit by the lamps’ orange glow. The old man took a seat in the corner and ordered a cup of tea. Kazuya followed and did the same.

Letting his long white hair hang down on the couch, the old man began talking. “Beelzebub’s Skull is a secluded monastery, oriental.”

“I know. I’m headed there as well.”

“There are many young girls in the monastery. They’re all nuns, of course. My daughter is there too, and I’m seeing her tomorrow for the first time in a while. I haven’t seen her in a long time, and I miss her.”

The old man smiled. His wrinkles rippled.

The waiter brought tea to the table. With a quivering hand, the old man lifted the cup to his mouth.

“Beelzebub’s Skull is a building that looks like a block of rock. The interior is a spiral, with numerous small rooms built on either side of its long, winding corridor. From the outside, however, it looks round and scraggy, like the head of a giant fly. Hence the name.”

“The head of a fly...”

“Yes. Only old-timers like me may know this, but the monastery was once a labyrinth built by the king of that country. When a terrible plague

broke out, the king didn't try to save his people, only himself. He designed the corridors to be winding to prevent the plague from wandering in, and hid in the innermost room."

Kazuya also brought a cup of hot tea to his mouth.

"But according to the legends passed down among the citizens," the old man continued, "this plague took the form of a demon. It took countless lives all throughout the kingdom, opened holes in people's bodies, and made them bleed black blood. And one day, it finally arrived. One night, it stalked Beelzebub's Skull with quiet footsteps. It slowly advanced through the labyrinth, and finally, in the morning, it found the hiding king. With its large body, hammered with countless rivets, it embraced the trembling king while he begged for help. The rivets made countless holes in the king's body, and black blood gushed out of them. The king died screaming curses, and with his death, the plague also departed from his kingdom. It happened hundreds of years ago."

"Really..."

"But it's all in the distant past. It's nothing but a legend now. My daughter doesn't care about such things. She's working hard for the night of the Phantasmagoria."

"Night of Phantasmagoria?" Kazuya mumbled as he set his cup back down on the saucer.

The old man's eyes narrowed in surprise. "You don't know about it? Then why are you headed to the monastery?"

"I, uhh... I have a friend there. I'm going to pick her up. So what's this Phantasmagoria thing?"

"There's a rumor that Beelzebub's Skull was used by Sauvville's Academy of Science for their agents during the last Great War. Despite its historical significance, it's now being used solely as a monastery. However, once a month, only on nights with a full moon, they hold a secret soiree—the nuns' Night of Phantasmagoria. And tomorrow night is a full moon. This train is full because of all the guests who have been invited to the soiree."

"A secret evening party..."

The old man produced a piece of paper from his pocket and showed it to Kazuya. He gasped. It was the same curious black invitation letter that Inspector Blois gave him when he left St. Marguerite Academy.

The old man put the letter back in his pocket. “Well, it’s a kind of show. Flying ghosts, vanishing lady, and magical limelights illuminating the monastery. The best Old Powers are gathered from all over Europe for the show—in other words, venerable magicians. People secretly come from all over the continent to watch their magic in action. I thought you were one of those people, but I suppose not.”

“Well, actually, I have an invitation as well.”

“I knew it.”

“Yes.”

“According to the old magicians, the monastery has always had a special magical power that is amplified with the full moon. That’s why they hold the soiree during those nights. Personally, I have doubts with the way they do things. I think it’s too ostentatious for a monastery. My daughter is a nun, but I feel that she is being manipulated by their magic. So I decided to check up on her.”

Fiddling with his beard, the old man let out a sigh.

The Old Masquerade blended with the stillness of the night as it slowly crossed the European continent, billowing black smoke. A darkness like black ink had settled outside, and except for the occasional passengers boarding at the stations where the train stopped, it was quiet. Hardly any voices could be heard.

An old man dressed in a monk’s garb walked down the corridor as the Old Masquerade once again rattled into motion. Carrying very little luggage, he wore a heavy-looking robe with golden embroidery. As Kazuya passed the old monk, he thought he spotted a familiar red hair at the far end of the corridor.

Kazuya let out a gasp.

The old monk lifted his head. “What’s wrong?” he asked in accented English.

“Nothing,” Kazuya replied. “I just thought I saw someone I knew.”

The monk glanced in the direction Kazuya had looked. In the far end of a second-class car, one of the only crude wooden doors of the luxurious train was swinging, as if someone had just closed it.

“Beyond that door is the cargo hold,” the monk said. “I doubt there’s anyone in there.”

“I see.”

The monk nodded and continued down the corridor. Kazuya was about to walk away, too, but curiosity got a hold of him. He turned to the crude door and approached slowly.

I know I saw red hair... That fiery color could only belong to that guy I met at the academy's clock tower...

It reminded him of the young magician, Brian Roscoe.

He thought back to the man's ominous foretelling of the future.

“She is Europe's last and most powerful weapon.”

“A big, big storm awaits the cub.”

What the old man said about the night of Phantasmagoria also came to mind.

There's no way Brian Roscoe is actually on the train...

As soon as he opened the door to the cargo hold, there was an eerie flapping of wings. Kazuya yelped.

In the dim, dusty space, countless white birds were flying about. A closer inspection revealed them to be in large steel cages, flapping, startled by Kazuya's sudden intrusion. Their wings gleamed ominously in the dark.

Kazuya looked around. There were no signs of people. However, there was a huge cabinet with decorative letters, a table with a mirror, a square box with a saber still stuck in it, and other items that looked like magician's tools.

“There's no one here,” Kazuya murmured.

He took a few steps deeper into the cargo hold.

As he glanced around, he found a familiar object. A Mechanical Turk. It was a small square box with the upper body of a doll attached on top, its arms outstretched over the chessboard.

It was a mysterious automatic doll that played chess with humans. The box was not big enough for an adult to fit inside. It owed its massive popularity to the fact that it could move chess pieces at will. Kazuya stared at the face of the funny-looking doll with its pointed beard.

He saw this same doll in front of the theater when he went to Saubreme alone right before summer vacation. If he remembered correctly, Brian Roscoe's show was about to start, and the man had it carried to the theater.

That red hair... Maybe he's actually here...

He brought his face closer to the doll. The carved wooden face looked Turkish, with a turban around its head and a dark beard that pointed to the left and right.

“What a weird-looking face.” Kazuya chuckled. “Ouch!”

The Mechanical Turk raised its club-shaped arm and smacked Kazuya on the head.

Kazuya was taken aback. “It hit me! Wh-What’s going on? How did it even move? It couldn’t have understood what I said, could it...?”

Crouching on the floor, he reached for the square box. He found a lid on the left and right sides. First, he opened the left side and peered inside.

“Some kind of machine?”

Inside were numerous small springs and gears. Kazuya closed the lid, then opened the one on the right side. He found the same thing. He could see the floor through the gaps between the springs and gears.

Kazuya examined the Mechanical Turk for a while, but gave up when he realized there really was no one inside. Sighing, he sat down on the Mechanical Turk box.

“That shook me. How does it work? It hit me so hard, like it understood what I said.”

He looked back at the little doll’s head. It seemed like the doll’s black eyeballs turned to him, but he didn’t notice it.

Kazuya let out another sigh. “It’s just like her. I just study her face a little too closely, and she slaps me with both hands because she hates it.”

He stared at the white ceramic pipe he pulled out of his pocket. Another sigh.

“Victorique, I can’t believe you’re so far away from the academy. Why do you always have to make me worry? You’re such a handful.”

Through the window of the cargo hold, he could see the dark sky and the dark blue of the Mediterranean Sea that stretched parallel to the tracks. He stared at the scene dejectedly.

He felt angry at Inspector Blois, for transferring Victorique, and then subsequently whining about how they couldn’t let her die. It was probably his father, Marquis de Blois, a leading figure in the Ministry of the Occult who ordered him. Kazuya bit his lip as he stared at the pale moonlight on the dark sea. He felt sad, frustrated, bitter. He exhaled when he remembered Victorique’s tiny figure.

I don't think St. Marguerite Academy is the best place for her, of course. But I can't let her stay where she is right now. I will find Victorique, and then we'll go back to the safety of the academy together. I'll return her to the library, to the middle of the stacks of books and candies. Then I'll climb the long, winding stairs, gasping for breath, to see her every day. She's been smiling a lot recently, too. Feels like we're getting closer...

He leaned against the doll. "I gotta save her quick. I'll deliver your stuff, and then... Ouch!"

The Mechanical Turk smacked Kazuya again.

"What is going on here?"

The doll's arms kept banging on Kazuya's head like a drum, seemingly amused. Kazuya jumped and looked back at the doll. Its black eyeballs were no longer moving.

"This weird doll is just like her, all right. Ow!"

The doll slowly stopped moving. Kazuya stared at the doll from a distance. He continued observing it for a while.

"What's its problem?"

Kazuya left the cargo hold and walked down the narrow corridor.

Outside, the sea surged quietly. The moon reflected in the water rippled along with the waves.

The next day.

Kazuya went to the dining car for lunch to find that it was quite crowded. There was only one extra seat at a table for six in the back. He asked if he could sit down.

"Of course. Sit down," said the gray-haired old man from last night.

The other four nodded. Kazuya thanked them and took his seat.

While the food was being served, the six people introduced themselves. They had some time to kill before the evening, and they were feeling bored.



The old man told them that he was going to Beelzebub's Skull to see his daughter who was a nun.

Sitting next to Kazuya was the girl with black hair and blue eyes in front of him when they were boarding the train.

"I'm going to Beelzebub's Skull tonight, when the magical power is at its strongest, to find my birthday," she said.

Kazuya spewed water out of his mouth. "Excuse me, Mademoiselle. I didn't quite catch what you said."

"I'm going to find my birthday," the girl repeated, slowly this time.

"What do you mean by that?"

"The monastery has a mysterious power," the girl explained with a serious look. "I can tell. I'm an orphan and I don't know my birthday. By knowing it, I will learn more about myself. That's why I'm headed there. I got the invitation the hard way, with the help of a friend."

A quiet-looking woman of about thirty, sitting next to the girl, spoke next. "There are rumors that a mysterious magical power resides in Beelzebub's Skull, but I'm a bit skeptical about it myself." Her eyes met Kazuya's, and she gave a sad smile. "I'm on my way there to see if I could talk to my late mother. Someone told me about the place. I've been missing my mother a lot lately."

"And I don't believe in any of that," said the young man sitting across from the lady, shrugging. It was the same average-looking man who was standing behind Kazuya while boarding the train. "I'm only headed there because an acquaintance gave me an invitation," he said with a yawn. "I'm Simon Hunt. Just a minor government official. I'm getting tired of riding the train. I have to say, finding your own birthdate. Quite moving."

The girl with the black hair shot Simon Hunt a glare.

"Now, now," the woman said. "I don't know how much of this is true, but my husband told me that there was a mysterious incident at Beelzebub's Skull during the Great War. Germans were invading the area from sea and air. People thought the place wouldn't hold much longer. And then, uhh..."

The woman looked at the old man for assistance.

Reluctantly, the old man spoke. "The case of the Image of the Virgin Mary."

"Image of the Virgin Mary?" Kazuya said.

"What's that?" the black-haired girl asked.

The old man nodded. “It’s a mysterious incident that’s actually been recorded in history. It happened on December 10, 1914—the Crashing of the Virgin Mary. During the war, most of Lithuania was Russian territory. There’s a theory that at the time Beelzebub’s Skull was used as a base for espionage activities by the Russian Intelligence Service and its ally, Sauville’s Academy of Science. We don’t know for sure, though.”

Simon sniffed audibly. The girl’s blue eyes bore at him.

“December 10, 1914, that is, ten years ago,” the old man continued, undeterred. “It was a cold, full moon night. German fighter planes were flying through the sky above the beach, when suddenly…”

“Suddenly?” the girl breathed.

“A huge image of the Virgin Mary appeared in the air.”

“An image of the Virgin Mary?”

“It was said to have been taller than the tower, translucent, and floated up into the sky with a very sad expression, as if grieving over the conflict. As if mourning the lives lost. As if lamenting the changing times. It floated in the night sky, tears streaming down its cheeks, and slowly vanished within a few minutes. But those few minutes were the difference between victory and defeat. One after another, the German fighter planes crashed, some into the dark sea, others onto the beach, burning in the night as pillars of fire rose to the air. The giant image of Mary appeared on a night with a full moon. That’s right, like tonight, when Beelzebub Skull’s magical power is said to be the strongest. Or so I’ve heard.”

Simon snorted.

The girl scowled at him. “Mocking the mysterious power will get you killed. You may not make it out of Beelzebub’s Skull alive.”

“Nonsense. I’m going home in one piece. I’ve got work to do.”

“Then you can just sit there and keep your mouth shut.”

“I can say whatever I want. Right, friar?” Simon turned to the sixth passenger sitting next to him. He had not uttered a single word, simply listening to the conversation.

It was the same friar that Kazuya passed in the corridor last night, a man wearing a heavy robe glittering with golden embroidery.

He smiled slowly, and introduced himself as Iago.

“Sir Iago,” Simon said. “As a clergyman, what do you think about the story? Must be some heretics if they believe in magic.”

Iago's smile grew wider, but he didn't say anything.

Irritated, Simon leaned forward. "Well? Do you believe that Beelzebub's Skull has some kind of weird power?"

"I don't know about what happened during the Great War," the friar replied in a low voice. "But I believe that the people currently in the monastery originally belonged to the Greek Orthodox Church. At some point, however, they started gathering people with bizarre shows they call soirees. Does the place hold some sort of mystical powers? As a matter of fact, I'm headed there to confirm it, young'un."

The friar gave an enigmatic smile. Before Simon could ask more questions, the friar produced a heavy, golden rosary from his pocket and held it up.

"I am a Miracle Certifier from the Vatican. As per the Abbott's request, I have come, as a representative of the Vatican, to verify the miracle in Beelzebub's Skull."

The other five people at the table gaped at him.

The man smiled. "I believe in miracles, of course. I just don't know if what they have in the monastery is a miracle or not. May God bless us all."

They all got up and started walking back to their compartments. Kazuya felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned to see Simon, a young man claiming to be a government official, standing there.

"Sounds silly, huh?" the man said. "Magic, miracles."

"It does feel odd," Kazuya replied, nodding.

Simon shrugged. "What a bunch of weirdos. Then again, they're going all the way to Lithuania for a soiree. Guess it's not that strange."

"Ahuh..."

"Hmm? What's up, kid?"

Kazuya, noticing that his watch had stopped, kept winding and tapping it.

Simon grinned. "Let me take a look."

"Is it broken? Can you fix it?" Kazuya asked.

"By the power of miracles, yes. Nah, I'm just kidding."

Simon took the watch from Kazuya and wrapped it in his large palm.

"Maybe if I mumbled some sort of a spell, it'd look credible? Something like, 'by my magical powers, this clock will be fixed.'"

“Uh...”

“Voila.” Simon opened his hand.

Kazuya gasped. The watch was ticking again. He looked at Simon’s face in surprise.

The man smiled proudly. “Easy peasy.”

“How did you do that?”

“Magic... is what I’d like to say, but alas, no. Watches sometimes suddenly stop working when old oil and dust get stuck inside. You don’t need to open it to fix it. Just wrap it in the palm of your hand to warm it up, and the oil thaws and the watch starts working again right away. Nothing surprising, really. My job is to detect sleight of hand masked as supernatural magic.”

“Is that what you do?” Kazuya asked as he fastened the watch back around his wrist. “I thought you said you were a government official.”

Simon suddenly went silent. He walked away without answering the question.

Kazuya thanked him, then walked down the corridor himself, back to his room.

As evening approached, the whistle blew.

A huge sluice gate separating the sea from the beach came into view. It loomed shadowy in the distance, standing between the purple sea and the white sand. Beyond it was the shadow of a huge building.

The Old Masquerade had finally arrived at Beelzebub’s Skull.

—wiretap radio 1—

Bzzt, bzzzzt.

Crackle.

Beeeeep.

“He’s here.”

“I see.”

Crackle.

Beep.

“One spy.”

“Only one, huh?”

“Eliminate?”

“Of course.”

“Roger that.”

“The spy will die inside the box.”

Chapter 2: Night of Phantasmagoria

The Old Masquerade arrived at its last stop, Beelzebub's Skull, halting at the sole, crude platform near the dark sea. Between the sea and the station platform stood a huge sluice gate, which was supposed to be closed at high tide, and a high stone wall.

Countless white bubbles were floating in the purple, evening Baltic Sea, slowly coming and retreating with the waves. Coming and retreating. The sound of the crashing waves rolled all the way to the passengers disembarking at the platform. The conductor announced that the train would return at the end of the soiree.

An early full moon was hanging large and white in the darkening sky.

Kazuya alighted on the platform with his huge suitcase, his eyes fixed on Beelzebub's Skull, which loomed in the distance, far beyond the sandy beach.

The blackened sandy beach stretched for quite some distance. At the end of it stood what seemed like a huge rock, craggy and shadowy like darkness itself, a sinister island that appeared after the tide had receded, devoid of trees or life.

"They say the light of the moon can make a man go mad," said the old man walking beside him.

"Yeah..."

"Quite an eerie full moon tonight, isn't it, oriental?" He followed Kazuya's gaze, to the huge chunk of rock. "Ah, that's the monastery. Beelzebub's Skull."

"Really? It looks like an island made of rock."

"Once we get closer, you'll see that it's man-made. And you'll also learn why it was named after Beelzebub, the Lord of the Flies."

Kazuya followed the old man, dragging the suitcase behind him.

Simon Hunt and Friar Iago were walking toward the monastery with their respective luggage, circling around to the left side of the monastery.

As they drew nearer, the rocky mass towered high in the evening sky, and the air around them began to feel heavy.

Kazuya gasped.

“Do you see that, oriental boy?”

“Yes.”

As the angle changed, Kazuya saw what looked like compound eyes of a giant insect on both sides. Indeed, the huge rock resembled the head of a fly. It was as though the ominous Lord of the Flies appeared in the purple evening sky, smiling down on them.

“What a place.”

Kazuya bit his lip. His grip on the suitcase tightened.

“It feels strange knowing that this is where my daughter lives,” the old man murmured.

Kazuya did not say anything. He just continued walking with his head low.

He could hear the waves crashing in the distance.

Victorique’s all alone here...

His pace quickened.

“What’s the matter?” the old man asked.

“Nothing,” he replied, continuing on his way.

The entrance to the monastery came into view. Guests who had arrived on the previous trip clustered beyond the monastery’s stone gate. Between the gate and the monastery was a spacious front yard with plenty of chairs for the guests. It was already filled with well-dressed men, women, and rowdy children.

Kazuya showed his invitation at the gate. A nun dressed in heavy black clothes took it. He could vaguely hear the old man asking one of the nuns about her daughter, but it was drowned out by the skittish voices of the guests rolling from the yard.

“I’m here to see a friend,” Kazuya told a nun. “A girl named Victorique, daughter of Marquis Albert de Blois.”

“...”

The nun did not answer.

“Excuse me...”

“...”

“You can hear me, can’t you? Hello?”

“...”

When there was still no reply, Kazuya looked closer and saw a surprisingly young and cherubic face, seemingly not much older than Kazuya's. Dressed in all black, her expression remained unchanged. She was quiet, as though she did not hear Kazuya.

“Mademoiselle?”

“...”

The nun gave a small shake of her head, then shoved the stamped invitation back to Kazuya. The next guest pushed Kazuya from behind. Reluctantly he proceeded to the front yard with his suitcase.

A gong sounded.

Someone squealed.

Children ran around.

Pretty girls in tight-fitting outfits that emphasized the contours of their bodies were walking around, talking about the soiree. The colorful flowers in their hair swayed in the cool evening breeze.

In the distance, two files of tall nuns marched into the darkness of the monastery.

The gong sounded again.

A clown began playing the organ merrily. The sinister laughter of some demonic being reverberated from somewhere.

It was a very strange place.

Kazuya looked around.

Victorique...

He weaved his way through the crowd.

Victorique!

He continued onward.

I want to see her.

For some reason, his heart ached badly as the thought filled his chest. His desire to see her resembled sadness. It almost crushed him. He recalled Victorique's rosy cheeks, so full of life, and what Inspector Blois told him before he left.

“She doesn't eat...”

“Doesn't read...”

“Just gets weaker and weaker.”

“If this goes on, a tiny breeze might be enough to extinguish the remaining embers of her life.”

Tears of sadness and anger filled Kazuya’s jet-black eyes.

Victorique... My Victorique...

He walked. Swiftly.

He staggered as he pushed through the crowd.

Suddenly someone grabbed Kazuya’s shoulder firmly. Thinking they were helping him, he almost blurted a word of thanks, when the person whispered in Kazuya’s ear.

“The furthest room.”

“What?”

“The room at the end of the spiral labyrinth, where the king died from the plague.”

“Uh...”

Kazuya turned, but his vision was blocked by a feather ornament on a large lady’s hat. Whoever grabbed Kazuya’s shoulder and whispered to him was no longer in sight. In the distance, Kazuya thought he spotted a red, flaming hair.

“Brian?”

Kazuya tried to follow him, but a group of clowns blocked his path. Eventually, he lost sight of the back of the red-haired man. Kazuya gave up and turned back around.

“Was that Brian just now? Maybe he really *was* on that train. What did he mean by the furthest room?”

Squeezing through the crowd, Kazuya made his way to the monastery, to the eerie round building in the shape of a fly’s head.

Beelzebub’s Skull was a bizarre building with endless spiral corridors. Dim lamps hung on either side of the dark hallways, and the smell of burning tallow filled the air.

There were numerous small square rooms on both sides of the corridors, from which sinister-looking nuns in all black came out and then disappeared into another room. Kazuya glimpsed young faces, as young as him or perhaps a little older. The black-robed nuns did not speak; they simply walked past, expressionless, like mass-produced dolls.

Dragging his suitcase, Kazuya plodded along the darkly-lit corridor, which wound around in a slight slope.

Victorique...

The corridor stretched on forever. The dark, winding labyrinth became even darker, narrower, and the incline steeper. Although he was going up, Kazuya felt a sense of sadness and fear as if he was descending deeper into the labyrinth. The air felt thinner. The lamps on the walls were closer now, and his face was burning from the scorching heat. Flames flickered despite the absence of wind. One lamp died.

A draft howled in from somewhere.

Feels just like St. Marguerite's Grand Library, Kazuya thought. I keep going up and up and up the maze, but I can't get to her. Yet I still keep going. Because I know that you'll always be at the top waiting for me. You don't say it, but I believe you want to see me too. I feel like we're really getting closer.

He walked and walked, pulling on the suitcase.

Victorique...

It was getting even darker.

Victorique.

Images of frills, laces, and scattered candies flashed through Kazuya's mind. Green, intelligent eyes gleaming coldly. Striking golden hair that hung down to the floor. Her distinctive dark glow. The mysterious aura that always captivated him.

A little Gray Wolf, and her Wellspring of Wisdom. Victorique de Blois, hiding a formidable mind that gathered fragments of chaos, reconstructed them, and subsequently verbalized them.

Soft frills and wavy laces.

Victorique...

The hints of frills gradually intensified. He could sense breathing in the depths of the labyrinth. Kazuya was the only one who could tell. The dress inside the huge suitcase flailed about. It wanted him to find its tiny, fearsome master quickly.

The presence grew stronger.

Victorique...

Find it.

Find the frills.

At the far end of the labyrinth was a room, its wooden door so small that even Kazuya, a small boy, had to bend down to get through it. Inside, a small, round shape stirred.

Kazuya stopped.

He smiled softly.

Gently, he lowered the suitcase to the floor.

—ghost machine 1—

Beelzebub's Skull, December 5, 1914.

The train rattled.

The whistle blew repeatedly.

The train finally quivered to a halt.

"We have arrived at the last station," the elderly conductor said. "Sir?"
He shook the young man sleeping in his compartment.

He grabbed his shoulders and shook him repeatedly. The man's head swung back and forth, but he showed no sign of waking up. Right when the conductor started feeling uneasy, the man finally opened his eyes and said something.

"Hmm? What was that, sir?" the conductor asked.

"Where am I?"

"The last stop. Beelzebub's Skull."

"I see..."

"You're the only one who rode the train all the way here. The rest of the passengers got off on the way. Then again, I suppose not many people have business in a field hospital like this."

"Field hospital?"

"It used to be a monastery, but there's a war going on. The army brings the wounded here. Young men dismissed from school and sent to the battlefield, but then ran into enemy troops before they even learned how to use a gun. Then there's all the temporary nurses who are the same age as them, carefree schoolgirls until six months ago."

"Huh..."

"We *do* get the occasional curious passenger headed for Beelzebub's Skull. Some gentlemen who look like government officials, and strange individuals like you."

"..."

"You look tired. I hope you didn't just miss your stop. If that's the case, you can stay on the train since we're heading back soon."

“It’s fine.”

The young man’s bleary eyes, green and upturned, snapped open. He stood up and brushed his long, flaming red hair.

He was a man of striking features. The conductor quietly stepped out of the compartment and onto the corridor, as though in fear of an awakened beast. The man had a slender build, somewhere between a boy and a young man. His red hair was like flames, dancing and swaying with his every motion.

“Can you please carry my luggage?” the man asked.

“O-Of course.” The conductor nodded. “Um, is it in the cargo hold?”

“Yes.”

“What’s in there?”

“You don’t want to know,” the man—Brian Roscoe—said briefly, chuckling.

The conductor glimpsed crimson tongue, reminiscent of a predator’s, and went quiet.

Brian Roscoe walked down the corridor and alighted.

He narrowed his eyes.

It was dusk. A dark sea stretched out under the purple evening sky. The sluice gate was closed, separating the sea from the beach.

Across the beach sat Beelzebub’s Skull.

A block of rock. A spiral labyrinth built by the king in the Middle Ages to escape the plague—the Black Death. After that, it was used as a monastery, but since half a year ago, when the Great War involving Europe, the New World, and even Asian countries broke out, it had been operating as a facility to house the wounded.

On paper, at least.

Brian Roscoe strolled down the beach. Porters in red and black uniforms followed behind him, carrying something large and square.

He walked across the sand for a while.

Finally, he reached the entrance to Beelzebub’s Skull. A nurse in white shuffling from inside spotted him.

“Are you a guest of Uncle Jupiter’s?” she asked curiously.

“That’s right.” Brian nodded amicably.

The nurse’s blue eyes blinked repeatedly as she regarded the man’s face. Then she pointed down the hallway.

“In there, the fourth room on the left side of the second turn of the winding... Um, I can’t really explain it well, so I’ll just lead the way.”

“Thank you,” Brian said fondly.

The porters exchanged glances behind him and sighed. Carrying the heavy, square luggage, they continued onward.

Brian followed the nurse as she walked down the dark, gently-sloping, spiraling corridor with a spring in her steps. The porters advanced nervously.

Simple lamps hung on the corridor walls. The smell of burning tallow wafted through the air. Then came an anguished moan. Screams. Voices of young men, some belonging to young boys.

Girls praying.

Doors on either side of the corridor slammed open, and nurses in white coats carrying bandages and other items hurried past.

“What an awful place,” Brian remarked in a carefree tone that belied his words.

The blue-eyed nurse guiding them nodded. “It’s been like this for a while.”

“What’s your name?”

“Um... It’s Michelle.”

Brian chuckled. “Why the hesitation?”

“Staying here tends to make you forget who you were. That applies to all of us. All the nurses here are just girls from girls’ schools all over Lithuania. Older nurses teach them things, but they don’t have any professional knowledge. And then day after day, injured men are brought in here. They’re all just impromptu nurses.”

“It’s the same with the injured brought here, no? Most are young men.”

“You might be right. Yesterday there was a boy reciting Heine’s poems. He said he loved reading novels and poetry. He passed away at dawn, but some of the girls stayed with him until the end.”

“Doesn’t sound like they’re suited for war.”

“Who is suited for war, then?” There was sorrow in her words. Her blue eyes flickered.

Brian shrugged. “Uncle Jupiter.”

“Oh.” The nurse nodded in agreement. She continued down the corridor, at a quicker pace this time. “He died holding a girl’s hand.”

“Who?”

“The boy who loved poetry. Even after he passed away, he never let go. We all recited Heine’s poem for him, so he could go to heaven. ‘It only sings of love there. I hear it in my sleep.’”

“I see.”

“I can’t help but get emotional. It’s war. I wonder if he made it there.”

“To heaven?”

“Yeah.”

“Just assume he did. That he’s in His place, where there’s no strife or sorrow, forever listening to poems of love. And you, the living, will forget him.”

Brian’s flaming hair rippled. Michelle suddenly stopped. They were in front of a door on the left side of the second turn. The door was different from the others, painted scarlet. Michelle opened it and led Brian inside.

It was an empty room, with a single fixed window. The porters in red and black uniforms laid down the large, square luggage on the floor, received a tip from Brian, and darted away.

“Wait here,” Michelle said, heading for the door. “I’ll go get Uncle Jupiter.”

“Thanks.”

“He’s been waiting for you. He says you’re our savior.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“He’s been waiting for Brian Roscoe for a long time.”

“I feel honored.”

Once he heard the door close and Michelle’s footsteps fading, Brian discarded his easygoing, laid-back demeanor. He surveyed the room with sharp eyes and pulled out a small red box from his pocket.

He glanced around, then looked at the box.

“I have to hide this...”

Brian scurried around the bare room, stumped. He crouched down and peeled off one of the floorboards.

Footsteps clattered on the corridor. Not Michelle’s, but loud, belonging to a grown man. Cold sweat beaded on Brian’s forehead.

“I have to...”

The footsteps were getting closer.

“I have to hide this memento!”

Brian shoved the box under the floor.

The door opened.

A middle-aged man entered the room. He was wearing a well-tailored suit and silver cufflinks. His hair, originally golden, had streaks of gray, and he had a lined face typical of a person his age, with wrinkles around the eyes.

Brian had put the floorboard back in place and was standing on them. Traces of panic remained on his face, but the man did not seem to notice. Flashing an affable smile, he offered his hand to Brian.

“You must be Brian Roscoe.”

“...Yes.”

“Thank you for coming to Beelzebub’s Skull. I’ve been waiting for you for a long time,” he said, keeping his smile. “Nice to meet you. I’m Jupiter Roget, President of Sauville’s Royal Academy of Science.”

Chapter 3: Silent Black Victorique

Kazuya walked down the hallway.
The hints of frills gradually intensified.

Victorique...

Find it.

Find the frills.

Victorique...

Find it.

Find the frills.

At the far end of the labyrinth was a room, its wooden door so small that even Kazuya, a small boy, had to bend down to get through it. Inside, a small, round shape stirred.

Kazuya stopped.

He smiled softly.

Gently, he lowered the suitcase to the floor.

At the furthest end of the labyrinth was a dim, eerie room with only a flickering orange lamp to provide light. In the shadows of what seemed like a windowless loft, where the violet rays of the evening sun did not reach, a small, dark shape lay still.

Kazuya stared at the small piece of black cloth.

He took a couple of steps closer.

“There you are, Victorique.”

His voice was soft. Gently, he reached out his hand.

Under a heavy black robe worn by nuns, something was trembling in fear. Something tiny, like a little critter.

“It’s you, right?”

Kazuya gently put his hand on the cloth and pulled it. A hesitant, husky groan came from within.

“It’s me,” Kazuya said with relief.

cough

“I said it’s me. Come on out.”

“Achoo!”

“Was that a sneeze? Are you cold? Here, I got your stuff. Victorique?”

A small golden head peeked out from within the stirring black cloth.

Relieved, Kazuya crouched down and peered into Victorique’s pale face.

Moist, tearful eyes stared back at him.

“...”

“Victorique?”

“...”

“Hello?”

Save for a crude desk and chair, there was nothing else in the room. No books, candies, fluffy clothes. It was chilly. An untouched meal lay on the desk.

Victorique’s face, her cheeks, once so rosy and puffy that anyone would want to poke it, had lost its color. Her golden hair, which used to swell in rage and looked like the tail of some ancient creature, was stuck to her face.

But her eyes remained unchanged, quiet and melancholic, gleaming darkly. She was staring at Kazuya as if he was the only thing she saw.

“Victorique...”

“...”

Her pale, small lips quivered. “Wh-What...”

“What is it?” Kazuya asked.

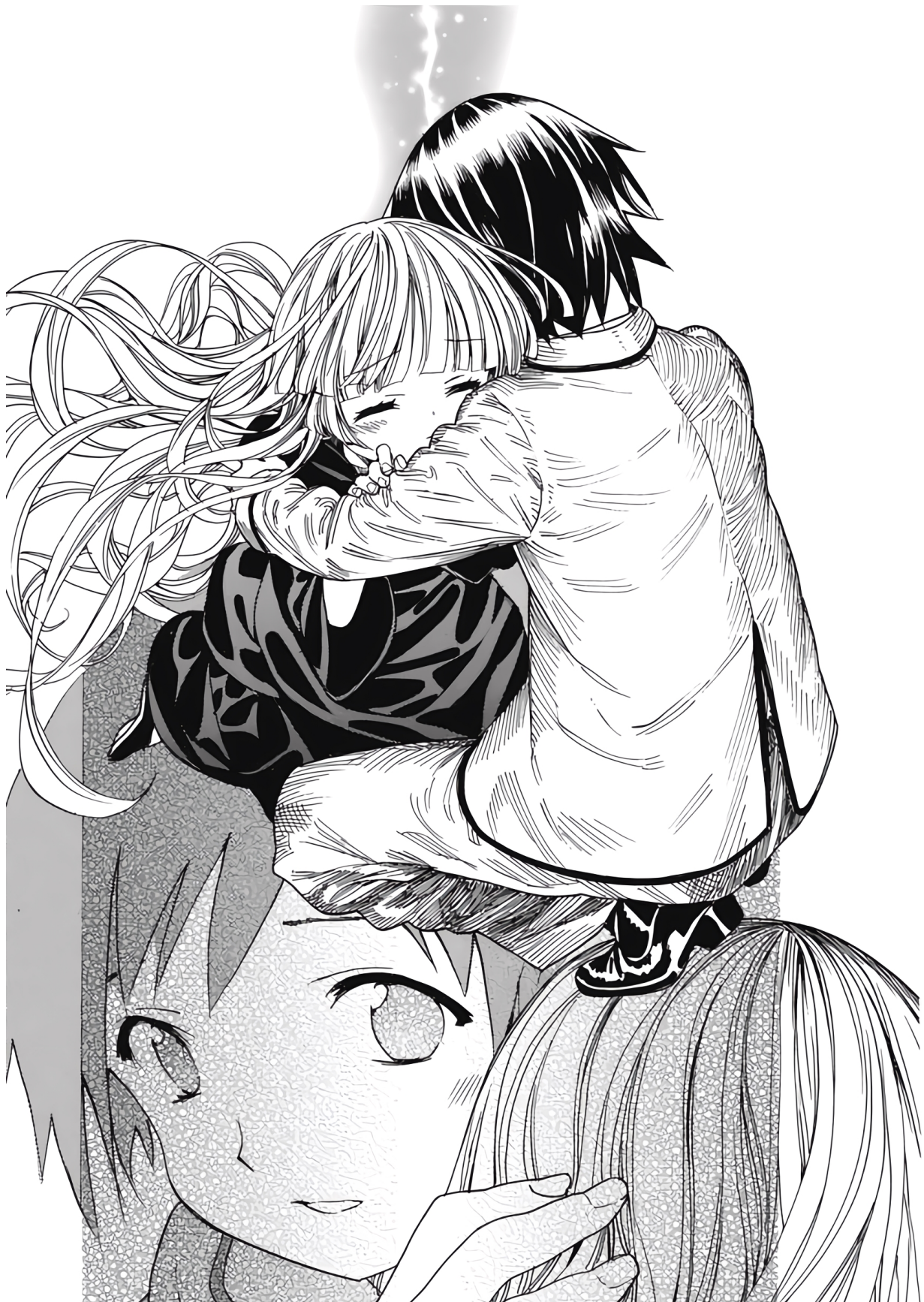
“Wh-What took you so long?” she murmured in her husky voice.

“I’m sorry. I got here as fast as I could.”

“I don’t want... your excuses.” Her voice was trembling.

“S-Sorry.” Kazuya poked her, and she flinched.

Slowly, fearfully, Kazuya embraced Victorique.



She sneezed. Her miniscule, fragile body was shaking under the cloth.

“So much smaller...”

cough

“Or maybe you were always this tiny. I’m not really sure how big you are exactly, since you’re always covered in frills. Oh, that reminds me. Ms. Cecile told me that you didn’t bring any clothes or snacks, so I brought some for you.”

“...Bring them to me.”

“Uh, right.”

Kazuya darted back to the suitcase and opened it. A pile of ruffles that Kazuya crammed inside popped out. White bonnet with fur, a stylish red dress, three-layered ruffled bloomers, embroidered ballet shoes.

Victorique watched him stolidly. “I’ll wear that one,” she said.

“This dress? Come to think of it, you’ve worn it before. So this is your favorite, huh?”

“Bring it here.”

“Right away.”

Victorique snatched the dress from Kazuya’s hands and slithered out of the black fabric. Although she was wearing only undergarments—baggy, ruffled bloomers, a petticoat, and a laced hoop skirt—she was as puffy as a pure-white snow bunny. Victorique put on a stern frown and silently began to dress. Kazuya, the upright man that he was, turned his back.

Fastening the buttons on her pretty dress, Victorique said, “I’ll wear that, um, red mini hat.”

“This one?”

“Give it here.”

“Of course.”

She wore the mini hat with its rose corsage and tied the satin ribbon tightly under her chin.

Color gradually returned to her ashen face. Her cheeks became rounder.

Barefoot, Victorique struck an arrogant pose. “Take out those boots!” she demanded. “Not that one. The silver ones right there, you number one idiot on the continent.”

“C-Come on. That’s a little bit too much, you egomaniac!”

Victorique silently picked up a pair of white silk socks. She slipped the socks on her scrawny feet before putting on a pair of silver, pointed boots.

She put on lace gloves and a glittering heart-shaped blue ring on top, as well as a large necklace of the same design.

And she was done dressing herself like a noblewoman.

“Kujou,” she called.

“Yes? Are you done? Let’s get out of here. We have to get home. This place is creepy, so let’s get back to the academy—”

“Kujou.”

“Can it wait? I’m packing up your stuff right now.”

“Kujou.”

“What is it?”

“Come here, Kujou.”

“Hmm? Fine. Do you ever stop yapping? After all the trouble I went through just to get here...”

Like a ferocious tiger observing its prey, Victorique waited patiently for Kazuya to come closer. Then, she kicked him in the shin with the tip of her pointy silver boot.

“Ouch! That hurts!”

She also hit him repeatedly with her small hand that had the blue ring attached to it.

“I said that hurts! What’s your problem?! Stop!”

Kazuya scuttled around the room.

“What is wrong with you? Have you lost your mind?”

“Kujou, you brute, scoundrel... you...”

Victorique clenched her pearly little teeth. Another smack.

“You’re hurting me. Seriously, what’s gotten into you?!”

“You...”

Victorique hung her head. The rose corsage on her mini hat quivered.

“What? Wait, are you crying? Victorique?”

A chilly air filled the room. It was empty, furnished only with a chair and an old wooden desk, where an untouched simple meal sat. The thick black cloth that Victorique had been wearing was lying on the floor, looking like a tiny black husk left behind after molting.

A gust of wind whistled through the cracks. Victorique’s magnificent golden hair billowed up from the floor and clung to the tips of Kazuya’s shoes.

“You took too long,” she managed.

“I’m sorry.”

“I was waiting for you.”

“Y-Yeah...” Kazuya drew closer to her, wearing a sorrowful look.

Victorique slapped his face repeatedly.

Whining about the pain, Kazuya inched closer and closer. He stroked Victorique’s head.

“Sorry, my Victorique.”

Victorique cast her gaze down.

Then her stomach rumbled. She pressed her stomach, as though she just remembered the concept of hunger. She glanced at the suitcase.

“That reminds me,” Kazuya said. “I brought books and snacks. I know exactly what you need.”

Victorique grunted and shot Kazuya a glare. “Well done, Kujou,” she said pompously.

“O-Okay... I see you’re still as bossy as ever. You could at least say thank you for coming to pick you up. Stop kicking me!”

“Hmph.”

Victorique, wrapped in a luxurious dress, plopped down on the shabby chair like a self-important noblewoman. Kazuya, mumbling under his breath, got down on his knee and took some chocolate bonbons, cookies, and scones from the suitcase and handed them to Victorique. The little lady took them in the manner of a noble receiving a gift from a knight, and began stuffing herself.

Her pale skin slowly regained its color.

The candies expanded her already bulging cheeks even further.

Munch, munch.

Munch, munch.

Munch, munch.

Munch, munch.

Munch...

“You’re such a dimwit, Kujou,” Victorique said, chewing on her snacks. “How did it take you a week to get here? You probably fell in some stupid ditch somewhere, hit your stupid head, got amnesia, and were just mindlessly wasting your time. World’s biggest dunce. You should be thankful you’re living at all.”

“Why, you...!”

Victorique sniffed audibly.

“I was attending class the past week! You don’t even know how worried I was, you self-centered runt! If I hadn’t come here, you’d still be crying in the corner.”

“I-I wasn’t crying!”

“Yeah, right. I saw the tears. Ouch! I said stop kicking me! Those boots are pointy!”

“I know.”

“Wait, don’t tell me you chose those boots just so you could kick me with them.”

“How ridiculous,” she scoffed. She stuffed another large chocolate bonbon into her mouth and chewed.

When Victorique, chewing on her food like some haughty lady, was finally full, Kazuya repacked her suitcase, held little Victorique’s pudgy hand, and started walking.

The gentle slope that Kazuya had climbed earlier had turned into a spiraling descent. This time, however, he was pulling Victorique’s hand, so it was taking much longer than before. She would call his name, stop, and shake her hand wildly.

“Kujou.”

“What is it? Come on, hurry up.”

“Kujou.”

“What?”

“Kujou.”

“...”

“...Kujou.”

“Just spit it out already.” Kazuya looked over his shoulder, annoyed.

“Stop calling my name without telling me what you want.”

“...”

Victorique quietly puffed out her rosy cheeks. Then, with all the strength she could muster, she kicked Kazuya in the knee with the heel of her boot.

“Ow! You little...!”

“Hmph.”

“Why are you so violent today?” he grumbled. “Come on. Let’s hurry.”

Kazuya pulled on Victorique's hand, and resumed walking down the dim, spiraling corridor.

The orange flames of the lamps hanging on the dark, stone walls rippled despite the absence of wind. The harsh smell of burning tallow pervaded the corridor. It was almost suffocating. In the dark labyrinth, black-clad nuns wandered in and out of the rooms like ghosts. They were devoid of expression, their vacant eyes like gaping holes in their faces, gleaming darkly.

Odd girls in black who may or may not be alive.

Countless black doors ran the length of the corridor, some tightly shut, others half-open and wobbling, suggesting that someone had just passed through.

The orange glow of the lamp illuminated their figures.

Suddenly, Victorique tripped. Knowing that she was sensitive to pain, Kazuya rushed to help her up. After walking for a while, she stumbled again, and Kazuya once again helped her up.

"How are you stumbling so much?" Kazuya asked wearily.

"My stomach is full," she mumbled. "I feel a little heavy."

"That's what you get for eating too much! You should take better care of yourself."

Victorique puffed up her cheeks, and went quiet, sulking. Suddenly, she started tottering away. Kazuya quickly followed her.

The corridor gradually became wider and the slope gentler. Their footsteps echoed. Occasionally they passed a nun in black. A door opened, a nun stepped out, then disappeared through another door. A cold draft blew past.

"Victorique," Kazuya called gingerly.

Victorique grunted.

"Can you at least answer me? All I'm hearing are grunts. You're such a pain in the butt! Ugh, fine. Why in the world did they bring you here anyway? I had to get here quick, so I'm kind of clueless about the specifics."

Groaning, Victorique cast her eyes downward. Her small, silver boots pattered loudly in the corridor.

"To summon someone to this monastery," she said.

"Inspector Blois might have mentioned that. Who exactly?"

Victorique did not answer. She just bit her cherry lips, her eyes tinged with sadness.

Kazuya decided not to pursue the matter any further. Squeezing her hand, he continued walking.

After walking for a while, Kazuya abruptly stopped in front of a half-open door. Inside was a small room, and for some reason, only this door was painted a flashy red, as if to distinguish it from the other rooms.

The mysterious Mechanical Turk that Kazuya found in the cargo hold of the train was inside.

A humorous face with a pointy beard and a turban. As if sensing a gaze, its small head moved slowly, toward the door.

Kazuya stiffened. Its black eyeballs flickered as if spotting him.

He yelped. Victorique tugged at his hand, and he quickly left the room.

Again, it felt like the doll moved... Was I seeing things? Yeah, that's probably it. A lifeless doll can't possibly move on its own.

Kazuya continued on.

As they got closer to the entrance of the monastery, one of the doors suddenly opened and almost hit Victorique. Kazuya swiftly shielded her, and the corner of the door hit the back of his head instead.

Kazuya let out a yelp. Victorique hit him on the head as well.

"Ouch. Stop it," Kazuya protested.

"Get out of my way," Victorique huffed. "I can't see."

"If I hadn't protected you, the door would have hit you right on your little forehead. Have you forgotten you're a sensitive wimp? 'Cause I haven't. I remember how you rolled around on the floor howling in pain at the slightest flick to your forehead."

"Wh-Who are you calling a wimp?! And I didn't roll on the floor."

"You were crying, though."

"I-I wasn't!"

While they were arguing, a man appeared from behind.

"Sorry about that," he said.

Kazuya turned. It was the young man who was on the same train as Kazuya—Simon Hunt.

"Oh. Hello, Simon."

"I pushed the door too hard," the man said. "See you around."

Simon Hunt raised one hand and hurried toward the exit. Kazuya watched him go, perplexed. He peeked inside the room where Simon had emerged from.

It was a room full of gears, springs, and huge levers, like the inside of a giant clock. The machines whirred. A large clock on the wall indicated the time.

“What was he doing in there?” Kazuya mumbled curiously.

They resumed walking.

Suddenly, Victorique stopped in front of a door. Kazuya stopped in his tracks as well.

“What’s wrong, Victorique?”

“...”

Silently, she peered through the half-open door.

There was a large, peculiar machine inside the room. It was square-shaped and had lenses protruding in several places. It reminded Kazuya of the photograph machine he had seen back in his country when he took commemorative photos with his family.

Kazuya looked at Victorique. “What is that thing?”

“A magic lantern.”

“A what?”

“I see.”

Victorique didn’t answer Kazuya’s question and resumed walking down the corridor. Kazuya followed, holding the tiny Victorique with one hand and the huge suitcase with the other.

And then finally, Kazuya and Victorique made it out of Beelzebub’s Skull.

—ghost machine 2—

Beelzebub's Skull, December 5, 1914.

An empty room marked by a scarlet door.

"I'm Jupiter Roget, President of Sauville's Royal Academy of Science."

Brian shook the hand of the middle-aged man.

"Did you just come from the nameless village?" Jupiter Roget asked, oblivious to the sweat beading on Brian's forehead.

"Yeah." Brian nodded.

The door opened and Michelle entered, but when she noticed the atmosphere, she stepped back outside, closing the door behind her.

The groans of the injured and the footsteps of the nurses rolled into the empty room.

"I heard you went to the forgotten mountain village of the Gray Wolves, provided electricity, and gained their trust," Jupiter said.

"I had some other business there."

"Right. I wanted to ask you about that. Is the box still in the village?"

"If you mean the memento box, then yes, it's in the village. Hidden under the floorboards of Cordelia Gallo's small house."

Jupiter's eyes narrowed. "I trust you'll return it at once," he said in a cajoling tone. "The Academy of Science can't let that thing fall into the wrong hands."

"I can't do that, unfortunately."

"What?!"

A rageful aura emitted from Jupiter.

Brian gritted his teeth. "It's my and Cordelia's lifeline. Cordelia is being hunted by Marquis Albert de Blois, a major figure in the Ministry of the Occult. We also know the great secret of the Academy of Science, a body that's in opposition to the Ministry of the Occult. I wouldn't be surprised if you killed us because of what we know."

"Well, aren't we distrustful?"

"This is purely a matter of interests. Political interests, that is."

“Yes.”

“I hid Cordelia somewhere safe. Same with the box.”

Brian knitted his brows as he glanced down at the floorboards where he had just hidden the box. Jupiter Roget didn’t notice.

“But you didn’t stop anywhere on the way here, did you?” Jupiter asked.

“So my hunch was right. You had someone watch me. But unfortunately for you, I’m clever. I’m not handing you that box. But I promise you it will not fall into the hands of the Ministry of the Occult either. It’s our lifeline. Only by keeping it secret will we be safe.”

“Very well.”

Jupiter’s face contorted.

Outside the fitted window, dark waves crashed and retreated. The sun was slowly dipping down the horizon, and the purple evening sky was turning darker.

“Brian,” Jupiter said. “What is happening right now is an epic battle that escalated from a conflict between two nations to a world war that involved countries from all over the globe. Nothing like this has ever happened in the thousands of years of human history. Perhaps it’s the consequence of the world becoming smaller due to rapid modernization. The political issues in Serbia, the Balkan wars, and the unfortunate assassination of the heir to the Austrian throne in Sarajevo definitely served as triggers, but they are only scattered detonators. We may never fully know what initially caused this global war, or why we are even fighting it. Perhaps in the future, after the war is over, early attempts to solve the mystery will be made by people all over the world, by countries that shared the pain, or by a mere bystander. But this is all just fiction. History is just another word for the twisted creative activity of recompiling the past to your own benefit. We will forever be ignorant of what is really happening right now. Do you understand?”

“Yeah.”

“And for us, this war is not only a battle between the Allies and the Triple Alliance, but also between Sauville’s Academy of Science and the Ministry of the Occult. Do you understand? We, the Academy of Science, are actively trying to adopt the new force that is science for the development of our kingdom. The Ministry of the Occult, on the other hand, is trying to compete with the modernizing world by employing the

ancient powers of the European continent—magic, imaginary creatures, occultic powers. But to us, that is nothing more than a reckless daydream. If we want to do what is best for our country, we should abandon the relics of the past, and flourish through science. The world is rapidly becoming smaller and more automated. Wars will no longer be fought between individuals, but between worlds. Beautiful personal credos such as chivalry will die because machines will be fighting in their stead. It's inevitable."

Jupiter's expression turned sadder by the minute. Brian watched him silently.

"Brian, young descendant of the Gray Wolves, an imaginary creature. You left the Nameless Village and make your living as a magician in the city. You declared that your show does not employ witchcraft, but tricks. It feels similar to our faith in science. That is why we rely on you. That's why we wanted to use a magician as a spy."

"The Ministry of the Occult is my enemy," Brian said curtly. "He hurt my Cordelia. The Ministry of the Occult treated the Gray Wolf only as a tool, a phenomenon, and inflicted a lasting wound. I will never forgive that twisted fanatic of the ancient powers, Marquis Albert de Blois."

"I believe he fathered a child."

"A tiny, young wolf. Only about four to five years old. Cordelia is concerned about the child she left behind. But I don't care about the child. The blood of that nobleman flows in her veins. Besides, Marquis de Blois would never give up the ancient power that he has finally acquired after much effort."

"I see."

"Marquis de Blois is my enemy. So is the Ministry of the Occult."

Jupiter nodded. "Please lend us your power," he pleaded. "On paper, Beelzebub's Skull serves as a field hospital, and to prove that, female students from this country have been deployed as nurses. But it's also a fortress used by the Academy of Science, in cooperation with Lithuania, for espionage. We fear that the Triple Alliance have caught wind of it. There are even rumors of spies from the Ministry of the Occult infiltrating this place, so it's not safe here."

"Hmm, I see." Brian nodded. "If fighting using magic is what you want, I happened to bring the perfect tool. I had a hunch it would come in handy. Over there."

He pointed to a large square object placed in the corner of the room, the same piece of luggage that several porters had to carry from the train. It was covered with a cloth.

“What is it?” Jupiter asked curiously.

Brian moved toward it and removed the cloth.

Hidden inside was a strange, square machine that looked like a giant camera. A large round lens was sticking out of it like a cannon. Jupiter couldn’t hide his surprise.

“It’s a magic lantern,” Brian said.

Chapter 4: The Fell Sisters' Cabinet

Kazuya and Victorique exited Beelzebub's Skull.

The front yard of the monastery was filled with spectators in glittering costumes, girls dancing, the feathers on their heads bouncing around, and laughing clowns. The organ, gongs, and flutes played a somewhat morbid hymn.

The old church in the corner of the yard was bright inside. Shadows of skeletons wobbled, frightening viewers. Behind the church was a desolate graveyard, where numerous torches stood, wedged into the ground, burning fiercely like will-o-the-wisps. Thunder roared in the distance, and the dancers let out exaggerated screams as they covered their heads in despair, eliciting laughter from the audience.

Kazuya stared absently at the scene for a while. He snapped back to his senses and glanced at the small girl in frills holding his hand tight.

Victorique was watching the same scene with her glossy, cherry lips slightly parted.

Slowly, she looked up at Kazuya with eyes as green as jade gleaming in the void.

"Kujou," she said. "Who are these even bigger dunces?"

"Um..." Kazuya scratched his head. "Some passengers on the train said that once a month, on the night of the full moon, when the magical power of this place is said to be stronger, they hold a soiree like this. It's called the Night of Phantasmagoria, a celebration of ancient powers, where they perform magic and stuff."

"Nonsense."

"Yeah. Do you want to go home now? Though apparently there won't be a return train until after the soiree is over."

"Hmm..."

An elderly friar, Iago, who claimed to be a Vatican Miracle Investigator, slowly walked past. A bluish-white ball of fire was following closely behind him. Kazuya eyed it curiously.

Victorique yawned. “Probably a balloon filled with phosphorus.”

“Oh, yeah. How’d you know?”

Victorique’s brows twitched, and she puffed her cheeks out like a child. “Who do you think I am? I can’t believe that’s enough to impress you. You’re such a—”

She didn’t finish her words. She looked away and stared intently beyond the crowd, as if something had caught her attention. She tried to stand on tip-toe several times, jumped up and down, but her petite stature prevented her from seeing anything.

“What’s wrong?” Kazuya asked.

“...”

“Did you see someone?”

“Yes...”

Victorique stamped her silver boots repeatedly, irritated by the waves of people, flying orbs, burning torches. Her gaze darted to the huge suitcase that Kazuya was dragging behind him. She grabbed it with her pudgy hands, and climbed up onto it, startling Kazuya. The bottom of her red dress, with its layers of torchon lace, and ruffled bloomers adorned with delicate flower-shaped embroidery swayed softly.

Kazuya caught a glimpse of her scrawny calf wrapped in white silk socks.

“Careful, Victorique.”

Climbing up the suitcase like a baby squirrel scuttling up a tree, Victorique peered across the crowd with her expressionless, emerald eyes. Her glossy, cherry lips parted as she tried to call for someone’s name, when her boots slipped.

“Victorique!”

She fell on top of the suitcase. Her eyes caught Kazuya’s face momentarily. Rattled, Kazuya quickly spread out his arms to catch her.

Victorique rolled down towards Kazuya. Her long, magnificent hair, like an untied turban, soared in the night breeze, gleaming a magical golden color.

Like a small bird flapping its red wings, Victorique landed on top of Kazuya, who fell flat on his back on the ground, yelping.

Sitting on Kazuya’s stomach, Victorique brought her small hand to her chin, deep in thought.

“...”

“Victorique?”

“...”

“Hey, Victorique?”

“...”

“Not even a sorry to me?”

“Shut your stupid mouth and keep quiet for a bit. I’m thinking.”

“Okay... But do you really have to do it on top of me?”

“Hush.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m too loud,” Kazuya mumbled. “Sorry. No, wait a minute!”

Victorique pondered something for a while.

“That red hair,” she murmured. “So Brian is here. Does it have something with the Ministry of the Occult and the Academy of Science? For pity’s sake. Too little fragments to go on.”

“Did you say something?”

“I did. But I’m not telling you. It’s too much trouble to explain.”

“Now, listen here...”

Before Kazuya could say something, a gong sounded, even louder than usual.

The spectators squealed.

The soiree was about to begin.

A middle-aged man, escorted by a group of nuns, stepped onto a round stage built in the middle of the yard. Wrapped in a black robe, the man introduced himself as the abbot of Beelzebub’s Skull.

“Welcome to our soiree!” his low voice reverberated through the night sky.

The crowd swallowed.

Victorique slowly stood up. Kazuya also rose to his feet, dusting off Victorique’s dress. Victorique wriggled in annoyance. Kazuya wiped himself next.

“Special guests who have come from all over the continent for this evening’s banquet,” the abbot continued. “Are you aware of the existence of mystical powers? In the distant past, ancient power thrived in this continent. The land of Europe was overflowing with magic, and we treated it as a part

of our lives. But..." He paused and cast a sweeping glance at the audience. "What about now? Trains run on coal, airships hover in the skies, and radio waves allow us to hear people from far away. Don't get me wrong. These are great advancements. But aren't we forgetting an important power?"

The night wind howled.

Thunder rumbled in the distance. Rain was coming.

"I'm talking about magic! Behold!"

Several pale skeletons appeared around the abbot and began dancing. The audience stirred. The abbot pulled a saber from his side and took a swing.

The invisible threads controlling the skeletons were cut, and they clattered onto the floor.

"This is nothing but a trick!" the abbot roared. "All the shows you are so mesmerized with are nothing but sleight of hand. We will show you real ancient sorcery, here in Beelzebub's Skull, a place imbued with incredible magical power. Chosen guests. Come, to the Night of Phantasmagoria!"

Dancers, their costumes flapping in the wind as they pranced about, lit the torches sitting on the ceramic bowls placed all over the venue. Numerous wisps of white smoke rose, and illusions began to appear.

A screaming woman.

A reaper clad in black.

A mirage of a woman, well known to Europeans, also appeared. A frail lady with a sorrowful visage, dressed in a simple, bright-blue dress. She was clutching a dazzling blue rose, her head slightly inclined to the side, wearing a frightened expression. Young and beautiful—the previous queen of Sauville. An eternally young girl who loved magic and the occult. Known as the Blue Rose of Sauville, she unfortunately passed away during the Great War.

The queen's face twisted with the swirling smoke. The ghost of the past opened its lips to say something. The smoke rippled in the wind. Watching the ghost of the famous beautiful queen, the women in the audience began screaming one after another.

"Looks like a movie," Kazuya whispered. "I'm guessing the smoke serves as the screen."

He glanced to his side and found Victorique trying her best to stretch herself taller. She was too small to see up front.

A boy wearing an Indian costume stepped forward. He planted a seed in the ground, which quickly grew into a vine that reached all the way into the night sky. Barefoot, the boy climbed up the vine and disappeared into the dark heavens.

The boy's head fell to the ground and bounced, startling the audience. A young woman shrieked and fainted. Laughter erupted. Gongs sounded. The boy emerged from the audience, picked up his head, bowed, and quickly disappeared.

Kazuya glanced at Victorique. She was still tip-toeing. Kazuya stood in front of Victorique, wrapped his arms under her armpits, and lifted her up.

She was light. It was as if there was only one kitten inside the frilly dress.

Victorique flapped her legs in protest. When Kazuya set her down on the suitcase, Victorique's cold, expressionless face twitched slightly.

"..."

"Can you see now?"

"...Yes," Victorique replied, turning her face away.

Kazuya smiled and turned his attention back to the stage.

A beautiful, mild-looking woman stepped forward and lay down on a bed as the abbot requested. She closed her eyes. After an incantation, her body slowly lifted off the bed. The hem of her dress hung down. The woman was in a deep slumber, showing no sign of awakening. Eventually, she landed back on the bed softly.

A huge ball of fire emerged from the abbot's hands and vanished into the night sky.

The organ resounded.

Another beautiful woman appeared. She bowed, then pulled out a pistol from somewhere, loaded it, and handed it to a young man in the audience. He shook his head in horror.

The woman repeatedly urged him to shoot. When the man refused, his companion snatched the pistol.

Gongs drummed.

Thunder boomed.

The man with the pistol aimed at the woman and pulled the trigger. The audience screamed.

Bang!

Silence.

The woman was smiling. The audience gasped when they saw what was in her mouth.

She was biting a bullet between her white teeth. It fell from her sensually-parted red lips and onto the stage. The woman bowed and stepped back.

The audience clapped.

“Next up: The Fell Sisters’ Cabinet!” the abbot bellowed.

Another round of applause. A long, old cabinet that could fit several people was brought in.

“What’s next?” Kazuya murmured.

Atop the suitcase, Victorique tilted her neck like a sleepy bird.

Two old nuns stepped in front. The crowd fell silent. The nuns looked remarkably alike. One had her snow-white hair hanging down her back while the other had it braided high on her head like a decorated cake. Their wrinkled faces were pale, and both were of large builds and well-postured for old women. A closer look revealed that the one with her hair flowing down her back had blue eyes, while the other had jet-black ones.

With trembling, wrinkled hands, the old women removed their black robes, revealing long, ascetic dresses, as white as their hair, that concealed their necks and legs. The designs of their costumes were slightly different: the one with the hair down had a round collar and tight sleeves, while the one with the braid had a square collar and round sleeves.

The old women bowed, and then, with eyes as dark-blue as the bottom of the ocean, as black as darkness, they stared at the spectators.

“I’m the older sister, Carmilla,” said the one with the untied hair in a husky voice.

“And I’m the younger sister, Morella,” said the braided one.

“The Fell sisters Carmilla and Morella are the final descendants of an ancient bloodline known around these parts as possessing magical abilities,” the abbot said. “They are authentic wielders of an Old Power. We will be showing you the mysterious Fell Sisters’ Cabinet. Behold!” he roared.

The sisters held hands and skipped toward the cabinet. They opened the double sliding door, revealing two chairs facing each other inside. As they

sat down, the abbot produced a straw rope and tied their wrinkled wrists tightly together.

He then slammed the door shut.

A moment later, he opened the door.

A collective gasp came from the audience.

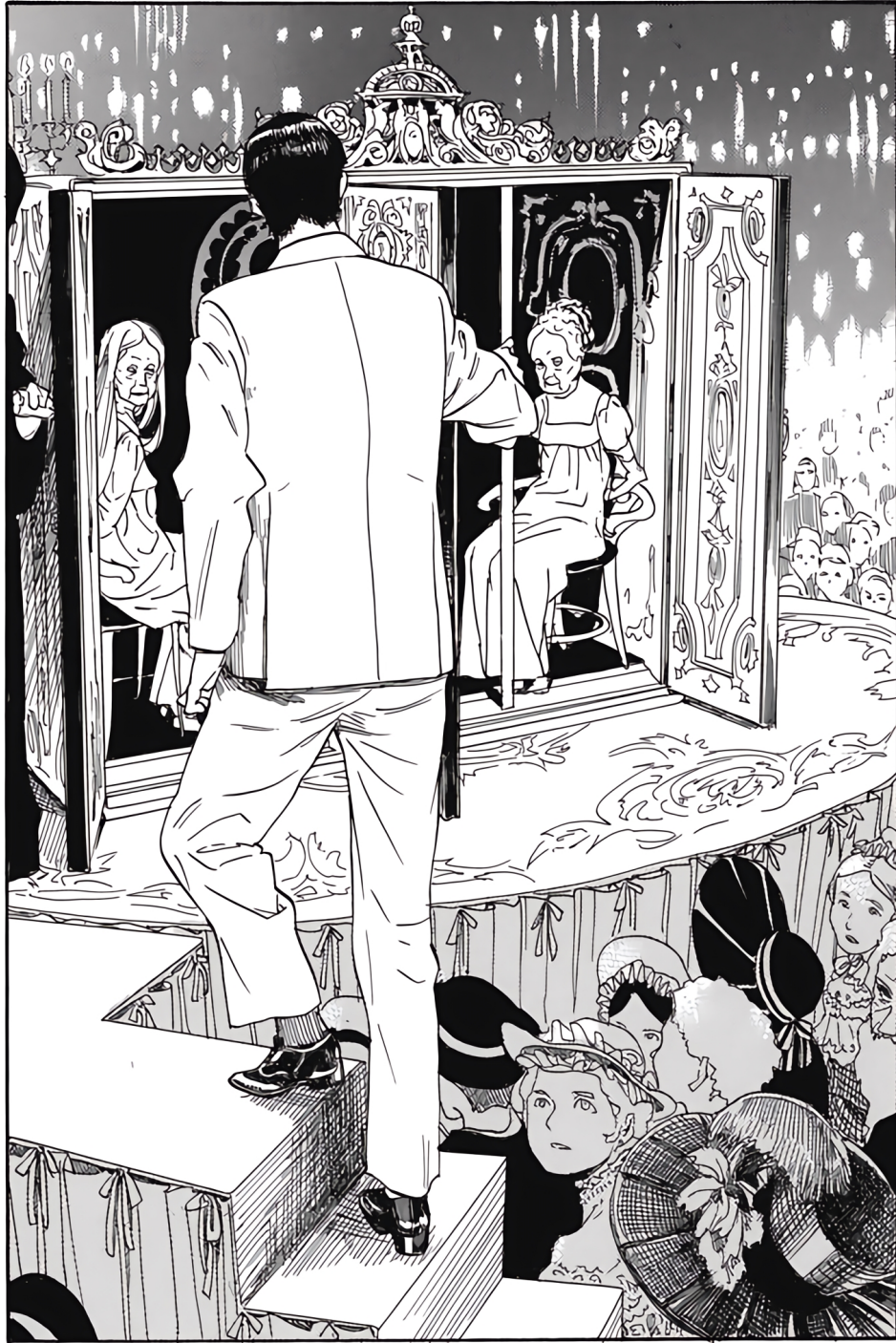
In just one moment, the sisters had switched places, despite being in a box that offered no space to move. Carmilla, who should have been on the right, was on the left side, and Morella, who should have been on the left, was on the right. The two slowly turned their heads toward the audience in a motion reminiscent of dolls. Simultaneously their lips—coated with bright red lipstick unsuited for old women—curled up into grins.

The audience stirred.

The abbot shouted once more and slammed the door shut, before opening it again. Every time he closed and opened the door, the two would switch places. A while later, the abbot tossed a trumpet, flute, and other musical instruments into the cabinet, and after the door was closed, the instruments started sounding from the inside. But when he opened it, the two women were still unable to move, their wrists tied tightly.

“Frauds!” a member of the audience yelled.

Kazuya turned around. It was a young man in a suit—Simon Hunt. He pushed past the crowd and walked onto the stage, pointing at the two elderly women.



“They’re untying the rope inside,” he said. “Magic? Yeah, right. It’s all just a trick. Ancient power, my ass!”

“If that’s what you think,” Carmilla murmured.

Simon Hunt turned his attention to the cabinet.

The sisters looked into each other’s eyes.

“If that’s what you think,” Carmilla repeated.

“You...” Morella said.

“...may come in too,” Carmilla continued.

“If you do...”

“...you’ll understand.”

“What happens inside...”

“...is something that science can’t explain.”

“Blessed by a mysterious force.”

“Such power.”

“Does not exist in the New World.”

“Only on the old continent.”

“This power that’s slowly disappearing...”

“Our ancient powers...”

“Will get you.”

“And you will be judged.”

“Come,” Morella beckoned.

“Enter,” Carmilla added.

“Young man.”

“If you’re just a normal spectator with nothing to hide...”

Their blue and black eyes widened.

“Then you have nothing to fear!”

Simon Hunt sniffed audibly. He approached the cabinet, his leather shoes clacking along the floor.

He fixed the collar of his suit and stroked his combed, short hair.

“I-I don’t have anything to hide,” he said. “I came here with an invitation. And I’m not scared of this farce.”

“Um, well...”

The abbott took the sisters out of the cabinet. He untied the straw rope that bound their wrists, then sat the younger sister Morella and Simon Hunt down inside. He tied the young man’s rugged wrists together with the old woman’s wrinkled wrists.

Carmilla grinned.

The abbot then took the flashy saber he used earlier and placed it gently on their wrists. Simon's face stiffened a little.

"If the saber hasn't fallen on the floor," Carmilla said, "it will serve as proof that the rope has not been untied.

"I suppose," Simon said.

"Goodbye, young man," Carmilla mumbled, and shut the door together with the abbot.

Soon after, a man's ghastly scream came from inside the cabinet. The abbot jumped. Carmilla's shoulders jerked.

They exchanged puzzled glances.

The scream lasted a while. Then it became fainter and piercing. The audience stared petrified at the stage, wondering what was going on.

No one wanted to interrupt the show.

Kazuya came to his senses and dashed toward the stage. Friar Iago too approached the stage, murmuring a prayer. Before Kazuya could open the door, the abbot stopped him. Friar Iago arrived on stage a second later, asking the door to be opened. The abbot looked at the cabinet, confused.

Crimson blood trickled down through the crack under the door.

Some of the audience were cheering, assuming it was all part of the show, while others were yelping in horror. Then came the faint scream of an old woman from inside. Carmilla instantly jumped to the cabinet.

"Morella? Morella!" she called in a husky voice. Gone was her theatrical manner of speaking. "What's wrong? Your sister's here! Morella!"

There was no reply.

The feeble scream continued.

Carmilla reached for the cabinet door with her wrinkly hand, but it was too heavy. Kazuya lent a hand, and together, they managed to pry it open.

Inside the cabinet was a pool of blood.

It looked as if a bucket of blood was dumped inside. The smell of iron wafted from within. On the right chair sat an old woman, covered in blood, her dark black eyes wide as she continued screaming. Her white dress was stained crimson. Blood marred her braided hair and her wrinkly, pale skin.

In the chair to the left sat Simon Hunt, quiet.

Eyes wide with horror. Lips frozen in a scream. A face contorted in agony.

Blood dripped from his suit.

Simon Hunt's corpse and the bloody Morella were still bound with the straw rope. As for the flashy saber that should have been on top of their wrists...

...it was embedded deeply into Simon Hunt's chest.

Women in the audience fainted one by one. For the first time tonight, the dancers let out genuine screams of horror.

Carmilla called her sister's name in a trembling voice.

Morella took a deep breath. "Sister!" she gasped in a childlike voice.

Her eyes rolled into the back of her head and she collapsed outside the cabinet, unconscious.

Pulled by Morella's scrawny body, Simon Hunt's corpse also tumbled out of the cabinet, rolling onto the pool of blood.

Thunder rumbled in the distance.

—wiretap radio 2—

Beep.

Bzzzzt.

“He’s dead.”

“The spy is dead.”

“Carmilla and Morella killed him.”

“All according to plan?”

“Of course.”

The Masque of the Black Death

Middle of the 14th century.

The castle was calm.

A huge labyrinth made of stone stood solemnly on a white sandy beach, surrounded by a purple sea.

At night, high tide filled the beach with seawater. Now under the morning light, seashells and green seaweeds left behind by the water sparkled. But come nighttime, the beach transformed into a world of darkness, where waves crashed and retreated.

The huge castle, resembling the skull of a sinister fly, glistened wetly. Its corridors were built like a labyrinth, winding, sloping upward little by little, and were filled with water during high tide and disappeared into the sea, save for a few rooms at the very top. Traces of seawater remained, in the smell that lingered in the air, in the droplets trickling down the walls and doors.

Servants from nearby villages gloomily entered the castle. Their faces were dark. Several years had passed since the Black Death, which broke out in Italy and swept across Europe, ravaged this small eastern country. Those who had lost parents, siblings, and children had no choice but to return this morning to take care of the man hiding in the castle.

The king.

A frail young man.

At the furthest end of the labyrinth, in a dark room with no windows, beyond a door too small for an adult to pass through, the young man was shaking, terrified, as he had always been, that the man in black, the incarnation of the Black Death, would find him. He spent his days trembling, raging, thinking only about his survival.

Meanwhile, countless citizens perished.

Because of the king's deception. Because of his desire for self-preservation.

The king was a young man of only twenty years. His seniors, who were supposed to teach him good judgment and responsibility, fell victim to the plague. All he could do was run away scared. To escape the Black Death, he had a labyrinth built in the sea, where he secluded himself. At the time when the whole kingdom was teeming with death.

That particular morning.

Through the shimmering shells, seaweed, and white sand, a figure walked toward the castle. Slowly. Leisurely. The bottom of his black coat flared in the brisk morning breeze. The man's face was obscured by his hood, and the only thing discernible was his large build. A man in black, as big as a mountain.

The man approached the castle.

The servants stopped working and looked at the man.

He walked slowly past them, keeping his eyes down.

The servants said nothing. They made way for the man.

No one stopped him.

They simply watched the man as he walked into the castle.

The trail he left behind was marked with murky blood. Copious amounts of it. It was clear that he didn't have long. The man's coat flapped in the wind once again.

The long sword he was clutching under his coat glinted in the morning light.

The servants silently acknowledged the man. Then, trembling, they made the sign of the cross above their chest over and over.

At the innermost room, where sunlight couldn't reach, the young king, wrapped in a cloth, was shaking, unaware that morning had arrived. He was a man of thin build.

The door opened, and a man in black entered.

"Who's there?" asked the king in a shrill voice.

"The savior of your soul," the man groaned. "Do not fear."

"I-I know that voice!" The king sprang to his feet, trembling all over.

Even standing, the man in black was still taller than the young king. The man slowly removed his hood.

A sinister face covered in black spots and wide-open eyes.

A hideous visage that would make one doubt if he was a human being at all.

A horrifying head, like a fly.

“Marquis!” the king exclaimed.

The man nodded. “O’ foolish, young king. As ruler of this land, you have lived a life of luxury since you were young. But it seems to me that no one taught you that with said luxury comes the duties of a king. When the Black Death swept over the kingdom and your subjects needed help, you fled.”

“B-But... I...”

“My wife died suffering. My young daughter passed away in agony. And I will not survive much longer.”

The man’s eyes widened. Blood oozed from the dark spots on his face. Reddish-black fluid, tinged with sorrow and rage, dripped from his eyes down to the floor.

“Stay away! Don’t come any closer!”

“I have come to save your foolish and immature soul. As one of your seniors. As one of your people, who lost his precious family.”

“How did you get here? What happened to the servants?”

“Nobody stopped me. We all feel the same. You abandoned your responsibilities and holed yourself up here alone. As such, you are no longer king.”

The man approached the king with a long sword in his hand. The king was petrified.

The sword pierced through the king’s thin body and came out his back as easily as if it were cutting silk.

Fresh blood dripped.

Dark-red blood gushed out of the man’s mouth too.

His eyes widened, red tears streaming down his face. He was about to say something when suddenly, as if someone had severed his lifeline, he passed away. The king, a long sword lodged in his chest, fell to the cold floor, pinned under the man. Blood spurted from his pale lips. In his last moments, he whispered.

“I don’t want to die.”

His voice trembled.

“I came here to survive. My soul cannot be saved. My soul cannot be saved, Marquis!”

His body convulsed.

“C-Curse you,” he snarled, coughing up blood. “Curse you. Curse this fortress. May those who come here shudder before the sinister mask of death. May this curse last for centuries, for eternity. Death will...” His lips quivered. “...come. Over and over.”

His eyes slowly closed.

This all happened a long, long time ago, in this very same place.

Chapter 5: Doughnuts are Holes with Rims Around Them

The front yard of the monastery was silent. When a body suddenly rolled out of the cabinet, the spectators simply stood there without a sound.

Thunder roared in the distance. Dark-blue clouds were slowly gathering in the night sky. Rain was coming.

Carmilla, her gray hair strewn on the floor, was holding her bloody sister. The abbot snapped back to his senses. He pulled a small knife from his pocket and cut the straw rope that bound Morella and Simon Hunt together.

Horried, Morella crawled as far away from the corpse as possible. She shrieked, gasped for air like someone drowning, before losing consciousness.

A drop of rain fell on her wrinkled face.

Rain began to fall. Thunder rumbled.

Screams rose from the crowd, the cold rain bringing them back to reality. They rushed into the monastery. Simon Hunt's body was starting to get wet from the rain.

"Call the police!" someone yelled.

"Does this place have a phone?"

Men covered the body with a cloth and carried it into the monastery.

Kazuya rushed to Victorique, who was sitting on the suitcase, and stood in front of her to protect her. His head was poked from behind.

"Wh-What is it?" he asked. "Can you save it for later? We've got a situation here."

"Don't breathe, Kujou," Victorique said in her husky voice.

"Okay, got it. Wait, what do you mean 'don't breathe'?" Kazuya looked up at Victorique in disbelief. "I'll die. No thanks. What's wrong with you?"

Victorique's green eyes silently regarded Kazuya. Her face was more serious than ever. Kazuya stared back at her with a curious expression.

Victorique pulled her eyes away and pointed at the white smoke. “I mean, as much as possible, don’t inhale that smoke.”

“Smoke? You mean the smoke they used as a screen? It doesn’t smell like anything.”

“Look around you, Kujou.”

He did as he was told. Women were screaming at the sight of the corpse. Men were shouting in rage. They seemed to be acting strange, their eyes blazing. A girl fainted. A young man slowly collapsed on the spot.

Kazuya glanced at the rising smoke. The cold rain gradually cleared the smoke away. A dark sky hovered above.

He turned behind him. “What’s going on here, Victo— Whoa!”

Victorique wobbled and fell off the suitcase. “You should be... more careful,” she mumbled smugly, her cold green eyes glowing sharply.

Kazuya quickly dove to the ground to catch Victorique.

“Hey! Stop messing around. Victorique? What’s wrong?”

Victorique let out a groan as she lay limp in Kazuya’s arms. She was lax as an unwary kitten. Kazuya shook her.

“Don’t... inhale... the smoke.”

“What’s in that smoke?” Kazuya looked over his shoulder.

Amidst the rain, the white smoke was almost gone now. Kazuya carried Victorique to the monastery to take shelter, dragging the suitcase along with him.

“Kujou, Kujou,” Victorique called, kicking him lightly in the calf with the tip of her silver boot.

“You don’t have to kick me, you know.”

Victorique was silent for a while. Then, instead of replying, she kicked him once again.

“Why, you...”

“Stay close to me, Kujou.”

“...”

“It’s dangerous.”

Kazuya wanted to give her a piece of his mind, but he swallowed the words. He glanced down at the tiny Victorique, all puffed up with frills. Her head barely reached his chest. Bending down a little, he looked into her face, with its sparkling green eyes, rosy cheeks, and cherry lips.

“What do you mean?” he asked. “Do you know something about the murder, the smoke, or this weird place?”

Victorique sniffed audibly in response.

“Now, listen here.”

“From past to present, conflict brews in this monastery. The murder is no different.”

“That reminds me,” Kazuya began as he resumed walking, pulling on Victorique and the suitcase. “I talked to the guy on the train. He said that the magic in the monastery was nothing but bogus. He also said that it was his job to expose such sham. Apparently, he was a government official.”

“Hmm, I see.”

“Victorique?”

Victorique said nothing more.

They entered one of the many small rooms in the monastery. All the guests had taken refuge in the other chambers.

Kazuya set the suitcase down on its side in the corner of the room, draped his jacket over it, and gently placed Victorique on top, leaning her against the wall. She looked lethargic.

“Stay close, Kujou,” she groaned in a haughty tone. “It’s dangerous.”

“That’s my line. What on earth happened to you? You look weary, it’s kinda creepy.”

“There was a peculiar substance in that smoke,” she said slowly.

“Almost like a drug.”

“A drug?”

“Yes. I believe they were burning it to make the audience believe that the magic they were showing at the soiree was real. Look at all the other adults.”

Kazuya looked around. The guests in the room were either throwing tantrums, arguing with each other, or crying. Some were sitting down with a headache. They looked somewhat deranged.

Despite looking limp, Victorique maintained her pompous tone. “Allow me to verbalize it for you, Kujou. Everyone foolishly inhaled that smoke.”

“You included.”

“Hngh...”

Victorique raised her fist and took a swing and almost fell off the suitcase. Kazuya helped her back up. Puffing up her cheeks, she pinched

Kazuya's arm.

Kazuya jumped. "What was that for?!"

"Hmph."

"Don't take it out on me. You're such a child."

"..."

An older man entered the room and began explaining things aloud. He said that they had no other choice but to wait for the train that was supposed to arrive once the soiree was over, and that there were no telephones in the monastery to even call the police.

The guests exchanged troubled glances.

"I don't want to stay in this place all night," a young woman murmured.

"If we call the cops, we could be detained for days," cautioned a young man, who appeared to be her companion.

"I don't want to get involved in this."

The agitated guests began discussing who killed Simon Hunt and why.

The huge suitcase looked even bigger with the little Victorique sitting on it. Kazuya stood beside her, keeping a watchful eye on the surroundings like a knight.

"Maybe there's some weird magical power here after all," a young man muttered, drawing attention from the other guests. They waited for his next words. "That Sisters' Cabinet was clearly strange," he continued quietly. "Their wrists were bound tight, yet they kept switching places. You could even hear musical instruments. To top it all off, a person died in front of people."

"Good point," agreed another man, nodding. "This is where the Crashing of the Virgin Mary incident happened. A giant statue of Mary floating in the night sky. I've actually met a fighter pilot who witnessed it. He said he will never forget its huge, glistening tearful eyes. He never flew again."

"What a load of nonsense," said a husky, old-sounding voice.

The adults turned to the direction of the voice, at the far end of the wall. There was only a small girl sitting on a suitcase and an oriental boy standing beside her. Their gazes darted between the two for a moment, before resting on Kazuya. They shot him a reproachful glare.

Kazuya shook his head in denial.

Victorique snorted. "It's obviously a trick," she said. "How can you not understand something so simple?"

Everyone let out a collective gasp when they realized that the curious, old-sounding voice was coming from a girl who looked like a porcelain doll in a red dress, silver boots, and a red mini hat, sitting on top of a suitcase.

"Doughnuts are holes with rims around them," she added. "In other words, it's all a matter of perception. I wonder what kind of darkness lurks within your hearts that makes it so easy to believe in such a silly trick. The wave of modernization and science is rapidly dispelling the darkness hovering over the Old World. Artificial lamps are shining their light on what is hiding within the shadows, exposing them. That's why you cling to the supernatural. Utterly foolish."

"What did you say?!" A guest strode toward Victorique, and Kazuya quickly stood in front of her.

"Hold on a minute," said a different man, watching Victorique's small figure with horror. "I remember now. I've heard rumors that the Crashing of the Virgin Mary was a trick. During the war, the monastery was secretly used as a fortress for Sauvile's Academy of Science, and a magician was called here."

"A magician? Why?"

"The Academy of Science was planning an espionage operation using illusions and approached renowned magicians at the time. One of them was, I believe someone named Roscoe. He's still famous, doing shows in many cities. He had a female partner. She was incredibly petite and possessed bewitching beauty." He turned to Victorique with a frown. "Just like this girl."

Dark clouds still hung over the skies outside the monastery, and rain continued to fall. The dim corridors were almost deserted. Voices occasionally rolled from within the open doors, guests talking about the murder and the cancelled soiree.

Kazuya went out into the hallway alone. He heard Carmilla shouting something and stopped in front of a room. Morella was lying on a crude wooden bed, mumbling incoherently. Several black-clad nuns were in the room, watching Morella with concern.

Simon Hunt's body lay in the next room. Some nuns were kneeling in prayer. Rosaries waved by the women in black glittered in the darkly-lit room.

Along the corridor, he came upon Friar Iago and an old man he had met on the train. They were standing there, talking.

"All this chaos, and I can't find my daughter," the old man said. "I'm worried about her. I have to check each person's face. But I don't want to wander around too much after what happened." He sighed.

Iago, a friar from the Vatican, was wearing a grim look. "I will probably return to the Vatican without any investigation done," he said with a sigh.

"I see," Kazuya muttered.

"I was watching the soiree earlier, but all the presentations looked like magic tricks to me. In short, like the magic shows that are popular in the city these days. The audience seemed to enjoy them, though." Iago let out a sigh.

Kazuya was about to go his way, when Iago said, "That reminds me. Have you ever heard of something called a memento box?"

"A memento box? No." Kazuya shook his head.

The old man looked bewildered as well.

"What is it?" Kazuya asked.

"I don't know either. It's just something that Simon Hunt mentioned. 'I came to this monastery on business. I'm here to find a memento box.'"

Kazuya frowned. "A memento box, huh..."

—ghost machine 3—

December 9, 1914, Beelzebub's Skull.

Day after day, the wounded were brought in, some drawing their last breath inside, others barely surviving, only to be sent somewhere again.

Every morning the gravediggers dug graves in the cemetery behind the monastery, burying young soldiers and digging new ones again. White-robed nurses sang hymns in their young, angelic voices. They sang the wrong lyrics, stuttered, and sometimes chuckled to get rid of the gloomy atmosphere.

One evening.

Brian Roscoe was leaning against the window, looking down on the ever-growing cemetery. His cat-like, green eyes were dark. His red hair fluttered out the window like flames in the wind.

“Stupid. All of this,” he muttered. “The fighting, the killing. But that’s ___”

He stopped when he noticed a silhouette stirring in the cemetery. A closer look revealed an elderly woman with gray hair praying alone. Wearing a nurse's white robe, she was thin, her hair, its original color indiscernible, glistening white and billowing ominously in the evening breeze.

She was one of the nurses working at the monastery. Many of them were young girls, but some were older. Sensing a gaze on her, the old woman looked and saw Brian leaning against the window. She gave a small nod and stood up.

Brian nodded in response, when he heard a knock at the door. He turned around.

A nurse entered. “Uncle Jupiter wants to see you,” she said timidly.

“Okay. I'm on my way.”

Brian pulled himself away from the window.

They walked down the long, winding, seemingly-endless corridor.

Brian stopped in front of a room. Several young Academy of Science employees were working inside. Gears, springs, and huge mechanisms made eerie noises. He glimpsed a large wall clock.

“What is this room?” he asked.

The nurse cocked her head. “I believe it’s the room that operates the sluice gate outside the monastery. If we leave the gate open at high tide, most of the rooms will be underwater. They say that the monastery was built that way on purpose. To prevent break-ins at night.”

“I see.”

“But since it makes living here impossible, they built a sluice gate. You can’t touch any of the mechanisms inside, for obvious reasons.” The nurse smiled. “No one tries to, though.” She resumed walking.

Jupiter Roget waited impatiently in the room with the scarlet door.

When Brian finally arrived, he turned and said, “The Germans are invading.”

Brian gave a low grunt.

“From the air. They must have learned from somewhere that this isn’t just a field hospital, but a fortress of some sort. There are rumors of enemy spies infiltrating our ranks. Either Germans or from our own kingdom’s Ministry of the Occult.”

“I see. From the sky, huh? Then we can use that.” Brian smiled thinly.

“What are you referring to?”

“The magic lantern. You wanted a man who could spy using illusions. This machine is, in a sense, all-powerful. It’s perfect for the coming age of machine warfare.”

Brian approached the machine sitting in a corner of the room. He removed the cloth covering it, revealing a square machine with a cannon-like lens protruding from it—a magic lantern.

Jupiter studied it grimly. “How does it work?”

“It’s a ghost machine, so to speak. A machine that artificially creates apparitions. What’s with that look? It’s an object made by science. I’ll show you.”

Brian opened the door and called for Michelle loudly. A number of doors in the distance opened, and girls in white came peeking out.

“I heard Michelle.”

“He’s calling for Michelle.”

“Brian is calling for Michelle.”

They passed the message along, and soon after, Michelle came running down the corridor. She looked up at Brian, her black eyes wide open.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I need lots of paper to make smoke.”

“You called me for that? I’m busy.”

“Unfortunately, yours is the only name I know around here.”

Michelle nodded. She shuffled away and returned with a bunch of papers.

Brian took them and closed the door. Light footsteps receded into the distance down the corridor.

He tossed the bundle of papers into the fireplace, causing flames and white smoke to rise. He then rushed to the magic lantern, inserted a transparent board into the machine, and flipped the switch.

Jupiter gasped. Brian’s thin lips lifted into a grin. Slowly, he turned around.

An image of the Virgin Mary appeared vaguely in the white smoke rising from the fireplace.

Jupiter shuddered as he watched the scene with wide-open eyes. The Virgin Mary was carrying a baby in her arms, her long hair hanging down to the floor, staring back at them with sad eyes. It was as tall as Brian and Jupiter, standing silently amidst the smoke, as if it were really there.

Jupiter yelped and made the sign of the cross repeatedly, taking several steps back. Brian inserted another plate into the machine.

Jupiter shrieked as he pulled his body back. The image of the Virgin Mary began weeping silently.

Retreating up to the wall, Jupiter looked at Brian. “What is this?”

“I told you, it’s a ghost. Made by this machine. Now, then.”

The papers burned up completely, and the smoke gradually cleared. The image of Mary faded, from her head, her chest, to her hips, until eventually there were only feet, which soon vanished as well.

“It’s nothing to be scared about,” Brian said with a grin. “This is how you use a magic lantern. The picture on the board is projected through the lens and onto the smoke. Look.”

He showed the board to Jupiter. The man finally stopped shaking, and he examined it.

On the transparent board was an image of Mary that he had just seen moments ago. It looked exactly the same. On another board were images of tears only.

“Projection...”

“Yes. This machine is popular among magicians. It makes dancing skeletons, giant human heads, and wandering ghosts appear on stage. It’s not a common illusion at the moment, but perhaps later, as technology develops, it’ll attract more people. Soon it will be far from uncommon.”

“Unbelievable...”

“Images will move, voices will be added, and it will become casual entertainment for people. The new power that is science, which you’re researching for the development of the world and your country, will be used not only for conflicts, but above all for people’s entertainment. The common people will enjoy the life of recreation that is currently the privilege of the aristocracy, and science will bring them both pleasures only nobles could feel, and at the same time, excruciating monotony. I have a hunch that the magic lantern is the first step toward science for entertainment and science for the lives of the common people. Only time will tell, though.” Brian chuckled.

Jupiter was still wearing a dubious look. “But how are you going to use this entertainment machine to fight?”

“You’d know if you saw the look of surprise on your face, Jupiter Roget.” Brian smiled and pointed to the ceiling. His green, upturned eyes glinted. “The Germans are coming from the sky.”

“It’s what the intel said.”

“We’ll make a ghost appear in the night sky.”

“What?!”

“We have a soft spot for the Holy Mary. Seeing her weep would surely rattle the young Germans. Even more so when they’re flying through the night sky to kill. Though we are entering a new age of science, we are still, after all, pious men of the Old World.”

The grin never left Brian’s face. Fear and disgust crept on Jupiter’s visage.

“Impersonating the divine? We can’t possibly...”

“You seem to be a pious man of the Old World yourself. I hate to break it to you, but there was never a God. If there was, there would be no large-scale wars like this. I believe that the people of the new era, the people of the New World, will not believe in God. They will live much more rationally, hedonistically, than you do. But they will also live more fleeting, meaningless lives.”

“How can you tell?”

“Gray Wolves, with the power of wisdom, can sometimes see the future. That’s why the Ministry of the Occult covets their power. I doubt the young pup is aware of this, though. Same with the handful of wolves who escaped to the cities. So what now, Jupiter? Will you play this trump card? It will protect you, for the mere price of your faith. I call it: Operation Weeping Virgin Mary. Now, then. What’s your move?”

Jupiter stared at Brian in horror. He seemed to have aged several years in just a few minutes. His lips were quivering.

The sun was setting outside.

Moments later, Jupiter nodded slowly with a pale face.

“Do it.”

Jupiter left, white as a sheet, leaving Brian alone in the room with the magic lantern. The dark room was faintly illuminated by the orange flames of the fireplace. Brian carefully inspected the complex machine, adjusted the scaling, and tested it repeatedly.

A little past midnight.

Brian was leaning against the machine, dozing off, when the scarlet door opened soundlessly. Sensing someone quietly enter the room, Brian opened his eyes softly.

The dying fire in the hearth crackled as it flickered, its feeble, orange light illuminating the intruder’s white coat. Their long hair glimmered.

Brian watched with half-open eyes. The intruder’s large, blue eyes snapped open, and the dagger in their hand glinted.

Brian bolted upright and flicked the woman’s hand away. There was a yelp. The woman staggered, but she kept her grip on the dagger. Brian grabbed her arm. She swung the blade around, grazing her own cheek in the process. Red blood trickled down the shallow laceration.

The woman—Michelle—let out a yelp.

“Are you the Ministry spy that Jupiter was talking about?” Brian muttered. “You don’t want the Academy of Science showing up in the war? I must say, I’m surprised. I never thought you were a spy, considering your age.”

“Let me go!”

“Even if I did, you’re not going anywhere.”

Brian let her go momentarily, and Michelle took off with beastlike agility. She opened the door and darted out into the corridor.

Clicking his tongue, Brian followed her.

He stepped out onto the corridor and went in pursuit. A door closed in the distance. Making a guess, Brian flung a door open.

It was an infirmary.

Countless injured lay in crude beds. There was an ominous smell in the air, a mixture of blood and medicine. Brian frowned. Nurses in white coats were hard at work.

A young boy with a bandaged face was lying on a bed at the far end of the room. He was holding the hand of a nurse sitting beside him. Startled by the door slamming open, the nurse glanced up.

Her gaze met Brian’s, and she smiled.

Brian’s lips parted to say something, but he shut it tight.

The nurse sitting there was the long-haired Michelle. Her bright, black eyes were staring back at him.

“Is there something wrong?” she asked with an inquisitive tilt of the head.

“Michelle,” Brian groaned. “You were just...”

“What’s the matter, Brian?”

“You came into the room...”

He tottered along the narrow aisle separating the beds, past the busy nurses and the groans of the injured. As he got closer, Brian noticed something odd.

The wounded boy was holding Michelle’s hand. His face was wrapped in a bandage; only his ears and closed eyes were visible. Michelle was holding a small book in her other hand. It was a collection of Heine’s poems. And on her pale cheek...

“What’s going on here?” Brian blurted out.

Silence descended in the infirmary, and everyone turned their attention to Brian. Nurses and the injured. Boys and girls. The nauseating smell of blood and medicine.

“What’s wrong, Brian?”

“Why...” Brian pointed at Michelle’s cheek with a trembling finger. There was not a scratch on it. “Why aren’t you hurt? The wound on your cheek is already healed. But it all happened just now. How did the wound just disappear? Normally it would take at least several weeks for it to heal. It was a huge cut, and there was blood. Who in the world are you, Michelle? A ministry spy at your age...”

“What are you talking about?”

“What the hell is going on here? Such healing ability can’t possibly be human. Is it another ancient power? Who are you? Answer me, Michelle!”

“What?”

“You were in the room just now...”

“Uhm...” Michelle looked confused.

The other nurses gathered around.

“Michelle was here the whole time,” one said.

“For over an hour now,” another added.

“He doesn’t let go of her hand.”

“She never left.”

Brian regarded them with a frown.

“She was with me the whole time,” the injured boy murmured weakly. “You must have been seeing things.”

Brian looked at Michelle.

“I’ve been here all along,” she said. “I was reading a Heine poem. He said he wanted to listen.” She recited a stanza with her angelic voice.

**“I everywhere am thinking
Of thy blue eyes’ sweet smile;
A sea of blue thoughts is spreading
Over my heart the while.”**

Chapter 6: The Spiral Labyrinth and the Memento Box

Rain continued to fall outside the monastery. In the distance, the sound of waves lapping against the sluice gate could be heard, mixing with the patter of raindrops.

Kazuya and Victorique were sitting on a suitcase in the corner of the room. The other guests were either sitting still or screaming among themselves. Kazuya was eagerly regaling Victorique with stories about his train ride and the conversation he had with the friar in the corridor.

“Iago said he doesn’t think any of the things shown in tonight’s party involved the supernatural,” he said. “They can’t be certified as miracles. He also heard the late Mr. Simon say that he came here to find a memento box.”

Victorique nodded absently. The smoke from earlier still seemed to be affecting her; she was as lethargic as a kitten, curled up in a tiny ball with her skinny legs, clad in silver boots, pulled up to her chest.

Kazuya peered into Victorique’s face. “What do you think he meant by a memento box?”

“Who knows?” Victorique shook her head. Her golden hair swung smoothly from side to side like fine silk.

She puffed up her puffy cheeks even more, ruining her majestic aura.

“Stop asking me about everything,” Victorique huffed.

“Oh, sorry. So you have no idea, huh? There are things that even you don’t know. I see.”

Victorique frowned in annoyance. “How rude,” she said, raising her husky voice. “It’s not that I don’t know. I just haven’t gathered all the fragments of chaos yet. But...”

“My brother used to tell me not to make excuses. You look like the kind of kid my brother would scold. But what?”

“You ticked me off, so I’m not telling you now.”

“Cheapskate.”

“Hmph?!”

Victorique turned the other way. She then sat down and remained still. Moments later, however, she gave in to Kazuya’s stare.

“You’re one persistent fellow.”

“What? I was just looking.”

“The Wellspring of Wisdom tells me that this case involves a past that we are unaware of, a conflict between closely-related people. It says to be careful. There is something I must do first before solving the mystery.”

“What’s that?”

Victorique’s quiet, expressionless, mysterious eyes blinked. She seemed offended.

She pointed at Kazuya’s face with her small, pudgy forefinger. “I will bring you back safe and sound. Without getting caught up in this mess.”

“...”

“I...” Victorique lowered her gaze. Her green eyes, like an unknown jewel yet to be named, sparkled. “I didn’t cry while in this monastery. I was brought here as bait to lure someone.”

“You mentioned that earlier. So did your brother. Lure who, exactly?”

“It should be obvious.” Her voice took on a raspy sound. “Cordelia Gallo, my mother.”

A cold wind blew through the room, rustling Kazuya’s jet-black hair. Victorique’s golden hair billowed ominously, coiling itself around Kazuya’s small, thin body, swirling, before reluctantly settling back down on the suitcase. Her frilly skirt stirred.

Victorique looked like she was about to cry, tears pooling in the corner of her eyes. She seemed like a little girl who had been scolded by her mother.

“I believe there is some kind of mystery surrounding Cordelia Gallo left here in the monastery,” she continued. “Whether it’s related to the memento box, I don’t know. There’s not enough fragments for reconstruction. Foreboding images of the past keep flashing in my mind. It could just be that smoke causing hallucinations, though.”

“I see... Are you okay? My head kinda hurts too, now that you mention it. I might have inhaled some of the smoke.”

“Everyone here did.” Her tone turned dark. “I think one of the missing fragments... is my mother.”

“What do you mean?”

Victorique’s voice dropped to just above a whisper. “I, the pup, was suddenly transported to summon my mother, Cordelia Gallo. Marquis de Blois thought that if I cried out, the mother wolf would come. But I did not cry. For days and days, I just stayed crouched in the corner of the room in silence. My mother never came.”

Kazuya listened quietly.

It was very rare for Victorique to talk about her family. Her soft, sorrowful voice reminded him of his own family that he had left behind. His father, a strict military man. His respectable eldest brother who taught him to be a man who would live and lay down his life for his country, not for himself. He remembered how his words made the little Kazuya feel uneasy.

Victorique continued on, stammering. The strange white smoke that she had inhaled might have cast a spell on the stubborn, lonely girl that made her just a little more honest. A tiny, chance magic that would be dispelled as night wore on.

“I climbed onto the suitcase earlier because I thought I saw the red mane of my mother’s partner, the half-human, half Gray Wolf, Brian Roscoe.”

“I might have seen him too. I thought I even heard his voice. Did he sneak in here?”

“I have no idea. If he was here, we don’t know why. He was the one responsible for the Virgin Mary incident ten years ago, though, when the monastery was being used by the Academy of Science. But what’s he doing here now?”

“Maybe he’s here as your mother’s proxy.”

“Who knows?” Victorique smiled thinly. “But my mother never came. Because I did not howl. Because I bit my lip and endured the loneliness. I couldn’t risk the life of such an irreplaceable woman. My mother did not come because I did not call her.”

“Victorique...”

“The truth is, I have a feeling that I will never see my mother again.” Despite her words, Victorique spoke with a calm countenance. Her face remained as cold and expressionless as always. “When I was only five

years old, I howled every night in solitude, tedium, and weariness atop the tower of the de Blois family. One night my mother climbed up to the tower's window and called to me. She told me that if I called her, she would come. She said she loved me. That was the first time I heard the word love. I didn't know what it meant, and from the next day I went through piles of books, searching for the meaning of the word. I read philosophy books written in German and religious books written in Latin. I wandered through the forests of science and read poetry. I dove into the seas of various theories. Finally, I deduced that the word meant to cherish what is irreplaceable and not to lose it. My mother said the word to me. Only her, and no one else."

Victorique's husky voice was tinged with quiet sorrow.

"That cold hand that touched my cheek through the bars. No one had ever touched me. No one had ever shown me love and affection."

Kazuya listened in silence.

"But I have a feeling that I will never see my mother again."

"Why's that? She promised to come to you if you called for her."

"Because I lost it." Her cheeks puffed, and tears formed in her eyes.

"My mother gave me a gold coin pendant back then. The coin was something she brought with her when she was banished from the Nameless Village. It had a string attached to it. She said that as long as I had it, we would never be apart."

Kazuya closed his eyes. He recalled how Victorique's sparkling, golden pendant fell toward the bottom of the valley as they fled the village together. A small gold coin hidden within layers and layers of frills.

Right. Victorique saved my life back then. She didn't care about her precious pendant.

He remembered the sad look on her face, the tears in her eyes, as she insisted that it didn't hurt. How he felt strangely sad. Kazuya bit his lip hard.

"So I decided to never howl," she went on. "Days went by. I lost all sense of time, of space, of anything. I transformed into a small monster wrapped in a black robe. Then I heard a voice calling to me from outside, from the brightness. Victorique. I heard someone calling my name."

"..."

“That voice slowly made me human again. A soft one. One that knows the meaning of love.”

“...”

“It was your voice, Kujou. My mother did not come, but you did. Like always.”

“And how did you thank me? By kicking and dissing me. Just downright mean.”

“Don’t sweat the small stuff.”

“Yeah.” Kazuya’s reply was quick.

Victorique shot him a puzzled glance.

“I don’t really mind,” he added in a barely audible whisper. “I got to see you again. Someone irreplaceable to me.”

Victorique grunted.

“That’s right,” Kazuya said.

They fell silent.

Victorique rested her small head on Kazuya’s shoulder. It smelled like flowers. *Victorique’s scent*, Kazuya thought.

The screams and cries faded, and the room became quiet. Victorique was sleeping softly. Kazuya smiled a little.

After placing the sleeping Victorique on the suitcase, Kazuya went out into the corridor. Nuns were distributing water and bread to the guests. After securing Victorique’s share, he headed back to the room, when he came upon the old man he was with on the train, wandering aimlessly down the corridor.

“Is something wrong?” Kazuya asked.

The old man’s bloodshot eyes widened. “I don’t see my daughter.”

“Oh, you haven’t found her yet? You can try asking the other nuns.”

“They’re not telling me anything. It’s almost like they were issued a gag order. I’ve been checking each and every one of their faces, but I can’t seem to find her.”

The old man cradled his head in his arms. He frowned, pinching the bridge of his nose as though he was having a headache.

“After seeing so many faces of women her age, I couldn’t remember what she looked like anymore.”

“S-Seriously? One look and you should be able to tell. And she would recognize you too.”

“Did I ever have a daughter?”

“What...?”

The old man stared at Kazuya with his glassy, green eyes. There was a hint of madness in them. Then he strode off aimlessly, leaving a speechless Kazuya behind.

A cold wind blew through the corridor. Kazuya watched the old man go, bewildered.

When Kazuya returned to the room, he found the black-clad nuns distributing water and bread inside. Carmilla was among them. She handed water and bread to Iago, who was sitting in the corner. They exchanged a few words.

A cold breeze streamed in through the open door. Iago was sitting facing the door. Carmilla moved away, and Iago took a sip of water.

Kazuya went back to Victorique’s spot. He was thinking of telling her about the old man acting weird, when a large man in black walked past him. Or at least he thought. Just as he was about to look over his shoulder, the lamps in the room flickered, and some went out. It was dim all of a sudden.

Then, there was a curious moan.

Everyone, Kazuya and Victorique included, turned to the direction of the voice. Friar Iago dropped his glass and scratched his throat desperately.

Suddenly, a large man in black, the same one who just passed Kazuya, stood over the friar’s body. It was too dark to see clearly, but under the black robe, Kazuya glimpsed a dark, bizarre face resembling a fly’s head. Beelzebub’s Skull’s legendary entity, the Demon of Black Death.

Carmilla screamed.

Iago scratched his throat, his eyes bulging.

He tried to say something, but Carmilla’s shrill screams drowned it out.

Iago collapsed on the floor. The large man in black with the head of a fly had disappeared.

Women screamed. There was a small sound of a door closing across the corridor outside.

Kazuya came to his senses and rushed to Iago.

“Mr. Iago?”

He raised the friar's heavy body up. Iago's eyes were wide open, and he was foaming at the mouth.

"He's dead," Kazuya muttered.

Screams rose from the guests.



—wiretap radio 3—

“The memento box.”

“Memento box?”

“Where is it?”

“Where is the box? If we don’t find it soon, the Academy of Science will beat us to it! I just killed Simon Hunt!”

“The wolves know where it is. Ten years ago, in the winter of 1914, the red-haired wolf came here and hid it. It is somewhere in the monastery. Even after the war, Jupiter Roget has not found it. Neither have we, the Ministry of the Occult. Only the wolves know.”

“The red-haired male wolf and its mate, the little golden she-wolf.”

“The she-wolf has a child. We brought the pup here. To bait the she-wolf.”

“When the pup howls, she will come. The she-wolf—Cordellia Gallo—will come.”

“She’s not coming.”

“She’s not coming.”

“Is Cordelia Gallo even alive? Who saw her last?”

“Only the male wolf knows. Only Brian Roscoe.”

“What if she doesn’t come?”

Chapter 7: Bewitching Black Victorique

The room was wrapped in silence. The guests quietly watched Iago's body.

An elderly female guest looked around. "Where's the man in black?!" she exclaimed, followed by a shriek.

A middle-aged man stepped forward. Identifying himself as a doctor, he inspected Iago's body.

"It was most likely poison," the doctor said. "But there's no way to be sure until the police arrive."

"Poisoning? He drank some water right before he collapsed," Kazuya muttered as he looked at the glass the friar had dropped to the floor. Water had spilled from within.

The crowd stirred. Some glanced down at their own water, while others quickly pulled the glasses away from their mouths.

"But I drank the water I received from a nun," a young woman said. "There was nothing in it. Only his water was poisoned." She looked at the person who had given Iago his glass of water—at the old nun, Carmilla.

Carmilla was standing in the corner of the room, trembling. Shaking her head, she made the sign of the cross over and over.

"I-I didn't do anything," she said.

"You were also nearby when the young man died!"

"It was my sister Morella who went into the Sisters' Cabinet with him!" Carmilla denied, disheveling her hair.

Just then, the door across the corridor opened. Light footsteps resounded. Morella, who looked exactly like her older sister Carmilla, her gray hair braided high on her head, entered the room.

"What happened—" The moment she saw Iago lying dead on the floor, she yelped, and made the sign of the cross in the same motion as her sister.

"What happened here, Carmilla?" she asked.

"He drank some water and then started groaning in pain. A large man wearing a black coat with a strange mask came and hovered over him. Then

he suddenly collapsed and passed away. The strange man disappeared somewhere.”

“A big man in black, you say?”

The other guests nodded.

“I think he had a weird face, like a fly’s head,” one said fearfully. “It wasn’t a human face. He must have been wearing some kind of mask to hide what he actually looked like.”

“A disguise, then? But where did he disappear to? He just vanished into thin air,” another mumbled.

Morella’s wrinkled face twisted in horror. “That sounds like the legendary Black Death of Beelzebub’s Skull.”

The guests exchanged glances.

“I’ll go get the abbot,” Morella said and left the room. Footsteps hurried away. More and more black-robed nuns gathered, and the room became noisy.

“Two people are dead,” someone murmured.

“The soiree is canceled, and we can’t go home because of the storm. Good heavens.”

“I think the clouds are just about drifting away. The rain seems to be letting up.”

“I suppose.”

Anxious whispers filled the room.

Kazuya left the room and walked down the corridor to check the situation outside. A few guests were outside, while the rest were in the large room. Nuns in black robes bustled past, emerging from one door and disappearing into another.

Kazuya passed by the room with a scarlet door, where a peculiar Mechanical Turk was stored. The door opened quietly, and a small woman in a black dress stepped out.

Her magnificent golden hair, like an untied silk turban, hung down to the floor. Purple laces adorned her dress, and she wore silk gloves of the same purple color, black enameled high-heeled shoes, and a mini hat that looked like a dark purple flower.

“Victorique?” Kazuya called.

The woman turned around.

Quiet and somber eyes, the eyes of a creature that had lived for centuries, gazed at Kazuya. He froze. His hand stopped mid-air before he could give her head a casual pat.

“It’s you, right?” Kazuya asked, unsure.

“Yes. It’s me, Victorique.”

Her voice was beautiful, a little higher than Victorique de Blois’, like a ringing bell. A strange, powerful tension gripped Kazuya. As he stood there staring at the chic, black-and-purple Victorique, she gave a bewitching smile.

Like a predator showing a little bit of its fang.

Kazuya couldn’t speak, couldn’t move a step. He was like a rabbit caught under a large animal’s glare. The woman’s red lips parted somewhat seductively, and she tilted her head a little, studying Kazuya. Her magnificent golden hair swayed.

“You must be Kazuya Kujou,” she said.

“Yeah. Wait, you already know that,” Kazuya finally managed.

The woman snorted, wrinkling her small, pretty nose. Her incredibly thin body, hidden under her lacy, black dress, shifted a little.

“You look like a halfwit. Can you even handle yourself?”

“I-I’m good. Rude as always, I see. Oh yeah, what were you doing in this room?”

Kazuya peered into the room with the scarlet door. Like before, there was a funny-looking Mechanical Turk inside. When he peeked in earlier, its head seemed to turn to him, and he jumped. Now, for some reason, he didn’t feel the same peculiar intensity from the Mechanical Turk as he did when he saw it in this room earlier or in the train’s cargo hold. It just looked like a normal doll attached to a wooden box.

Kazuya watched the doll curiously, when he noticed something strange on the floor. One of the floorboards had been removed, revealing a small square hole. It was as if something was hidden there.

He turned his attention back to the woman. His gaze was drawn to her hands, wrapped in smooth purple gloves, carefully holding a small, red, square-shaped box.

“What’s that?” Kazuya asked.

“A memento box.”

“Really? That’s the memento box? Does it have something to do with the hole in the floor there? You said you didn’t know what a memento box was. No, wait. More like you didn’t have enough fragments or something. Basically making up excuses. Man, you were such a jerk too! So you figured it out? What is it? Let me see.”

Kazuya reached for the box, but the woman slapped his hand.

“Ouch!”

“The box was hidden under the floor of a house in the Nameless Village. Ten years ago, at the outbreak of the Great War, Brian Roscoe went to the village, took it out of there, and hid it in the monastery. Brian had intended to retrieve it immediately, but after the war ended, the monastery became home to the Ministry of the Occult. So it’s remained here ever since. I have just now recovered it. I was just thinking of leaving a replica behind.”

“Is that so...”

The woman chuckled. She didn’t sound like Victorique.

“One of the Academy of Science’s greatest secrets lie hidden in this box. For our own safety, it must not fall to the hands of the Academy of Science or the Ministry of the Occult. It’s our lifeline.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Good question.”

The woman grinned. Kazuya sensed the overwhelming presence of a ferocious beast. It felt familiar.

That’s right. Brian Roscoe. I felt the same thing when I faced him in the clock tower. A mysterious intensity...

The woman took a step back and moved away.

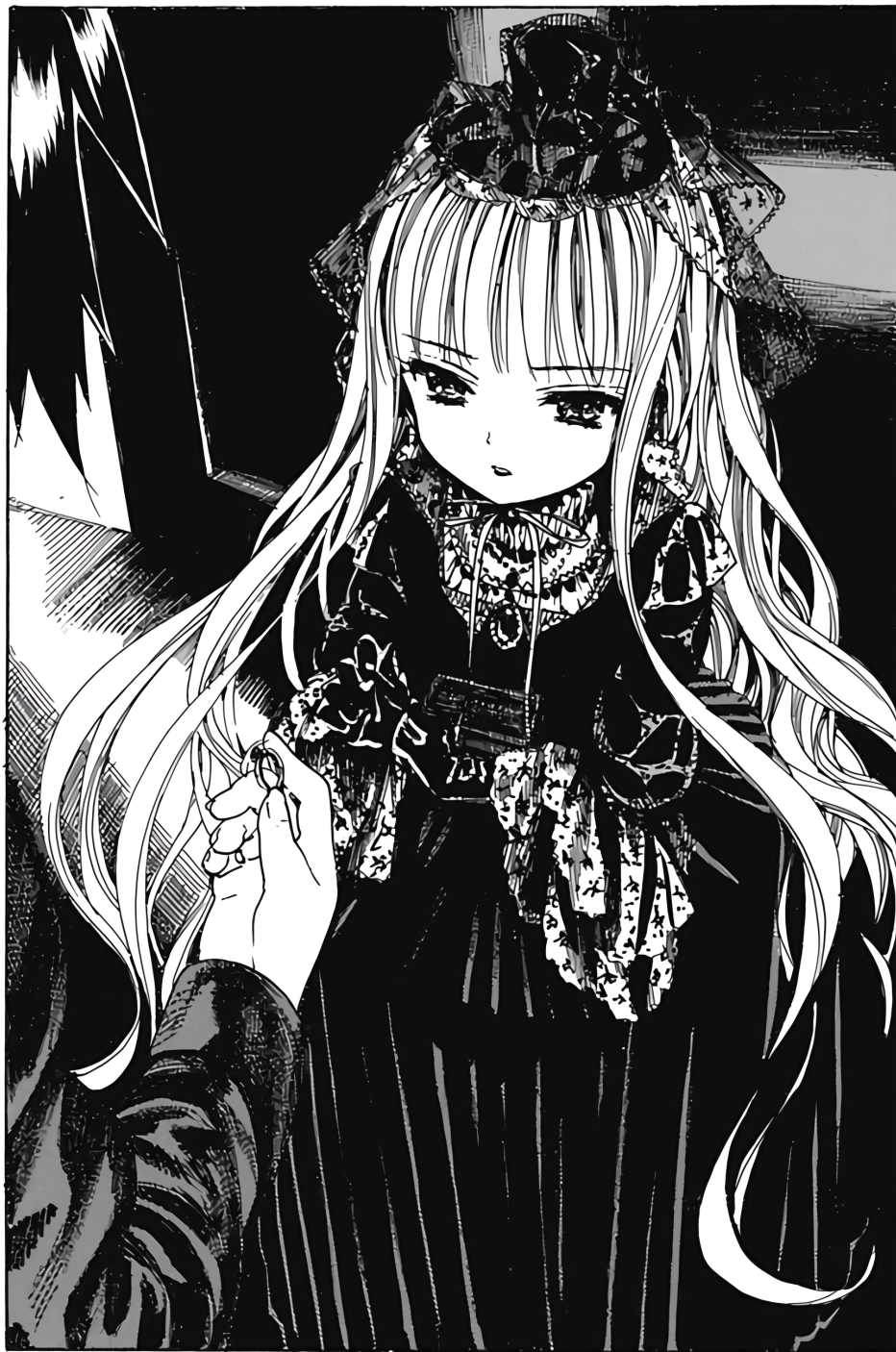
“Hey,” Kazuya called.

“I have to go,” she said.

“Um...”

“Oh, by the way, lad.”

The woman pulled a sparkling, dark purple ring she wore over her silk glove and handed it to Kazuya. Her bewitching and horrifyingly beautiful face contorted.



“Take this,” she muttered bitterly.

“L-Lad?”

“Give this to her.”

“Who?”

“To the girl you’re going home with.”

Kazuya studied the ring he received. Then he gasped. Slowly, he looked up and stared into the woman’s face.

The woman’s emerald eyes still showed no expression, quiet and bored, like some gigantic, ancient creature. But the edges gleamed wetly. Kazuya looked closer.

“The girl...”

“Yes. Give it to her.” Her voice turned higher and sweet, like a ringing bell. “Tell her her mother loves her little girl. That even when she didn’t howl, I came.”

“Co...”

“And tell her that if she can, she should solve the mystery of what happened here. She has the power. Tell her to use it. Tell her to demonstrate her power so that she may live.”

“Cor...”

“I have to go. They must not see another similar-looking woman in the same place.”

She spun. Her black, enameled high-heeled shoes clattered down the corridor. Kazuya snapped back to his senses and scurried after the woman. Her figure, clothed in black and purple ruffles, moved further and further away.

“Wait!” Kazuya yelled. “Please go see her! She misses her mother so much. She always wanted to see her again!”

Kazuya ran down the spiraling corridor.

At the far end of the corridor, the black and purple dress fluttered and vanished. Kazuya stopped, dumbfounded.

He stared at the ring in his hand.

Kazuya returned to the room from which the mysterious woman emerged. The Mechanical Turk was still there. But it lacked the mystical powers it demonstrated when it hit Kazuya on the train or when its eyeballs

moved to glare at him. Right now it was just a puppet attached to a wooden box, and when he touched it, its arms remained still.

Kazuya opened the lid of the box. All he saw were springs and gears and screws. He frowned. Then he left the room and started walking again.

When he returned to the large, crowded room, he found Victorique still sitting on the huge suitcase in a corner. Unable to reach the floor, her small feet dangled in the air. Kazuya slowly approached her, wearing a solemn expression.

Victorique's rosy cheeks puffed up. "I'm bored!" she snapped, pounding his head.

"Ouch! Now, look here. You can't hit people just because you're bored. You're such a handful."

Kazuya sat down next to Victorique. The huge suitcase didn't even budge with the two of them sitting on it; Kazuya was small and Victorique even smaller. Kazuya, copying Victorique, flailed his legs back and forth.

"I just want to be sure about something," he said.

"What is it, halfwit?"

"Call me a halfwit again, and we're done."

Victorique grunted in response and looked away.

"You didn't change your dress and come out of a different room, did you?" Kazuya asked.

Victorique turned her gaze back slowly. Her large, green eyes widened, and she looked eerily at Kazuya's face. Like a cat approaching a curious toy, she moved her face closer to him.

Victorique wrinkled her pretty nose. "Of course not."

"I thought so."

"Are you still suffering from the effects of that stupid smoke? It would be hilarious if it never wore off. I would, however, appreciate it if you didn't bother me with your nonsense."

"There you go again." Kazuya sighed. "Glad to see you're back to normal, though."

He stared at Victorique's face. After a moment of hesitation, he slowly opened his hand, revealing a dark, purple ring.

Victorique's breath caught. Her glossy, cherry lips quivered as she silently took the ring and placed it on her finger.

“So I passed by the room with the Mechanical Turk, and you came out in a black dress, looking a bit mature.”

Victorique groaned softly.

“She called me lad, and asked if I could handle myself ’cause I looked like a halfwit. She was as rude as you, all right. She gave this to me.”

“...”

“Before she left, she asked me to give this to the girl. And that’s when it hit me. She wasn’t you. But then who was she? She took the memento box that Brian Roscoe hid in that room ten years ago, then walked down the corridor, pretending to be you.”

Victorique gasped. She sprang to her feet and tried to run, but she staggered and plopped down. Kazuya moved toward her.

“Did she leave?” Victorique asked, still down on the floor.

“Yeah. I tried to stop her. I told her you wanted to see her. She left a message, though. Uhm... ‘Her mother loves her little girl.’”

“...”

“‘Even when you didn’t howl, I came.’ She said to solve the mystery. To demonstrate your power so that you may live.”

Victorique hung her head low. Her shoulders shook. Kazuya gingerly pulled her golden head close.

Pressing her nose against Kazuya’s chest, Victorique mumbled something, whimpering, howling.

The little Victorique silently wept in Kazuya’s chest.

—ghost machine 4—

December 10, 1914, Beelzebub's Skull.

The dark-purple, midwinter sea seemed like it would freeze over at any moment. Waves crashed and retreated. An otherworldly and enigmatic night was about to begin, which would later be known in history as the Crashing of the Virgin Mary incident.

A pale full moon sat in the night sky, glowing ominously, casting its own reflection on the dark sea. From a distance, it seemed as if two moons were staring at each other. Rippling waves made the moon in the water quiver as if it had a life on its own.

“All ready,” murmured a tall, young man with a mane of crimson hair. He nodded, his upturned, deep-green eyes glinting. “All we have to do now is wait. Come, Luftwaffe youngsters. To the sea of death.”

The young man—Brian Roscoe—grinned, the grin of a predator, curiously fierce. The pair of white canine teeth peeking out from his lips seemed like fangs.

Flames crackled in the fireplace of the dim room furnished only by a shabby table and a chair. The magic lantern that Brian brought sat at the window, its huge cannon-like lens pointed outside. Brian had tinkered with the strange device, which he named the Ghost Machine, making adjustments and fine-tunings. His red hair hung down over the machine, swaying like flames.

Brian brushed his hair back and narrowed his green eyes.

“They’re here.”

He strained his ears and looked out the window, peered into the night sky.

There was a faint noise, a buzzing of insects. But it sounded oddly unnatural.

“The Luftwaffe.”

There was a loud thud. Brian jumped and turned around.

His brows furrowed. “Who’s there?” he mumbled.

The door was still now.

For a while, Brian kept his gaze fixed on the door, then he pulled his eyes away.

Outside the window, the buzzing of insects grew louder. Numerous weird sounds reverberated through the night sky. Black, eerily-designed, man-made insects—German fighter planes—appeared in the sky like a swarm of black dots, illuminated by the sinister glow of the full moon. The purple sea heaved.

There was a loud bang, and a flash of light hit the exterior of the monastery. Orange sparks scattered as the stone wall crumbled. The next bombardment began.

A cold breeze brushed Brian's ears from behind, and he quickly turned around.

The scarlet door behind him had opened without a sound. Two Michelles, clutching daggers, approached Brian cautiously like cats.

Brian slowly reached for the magic lantern and flipped the switch.

With a clatter, the device activated.

"How could you?!" shouted a young girl outside—a nun.

Brian took a few steps back. He glared at the two Michelles—at the two old women with long gray hair. One had blue eyes, and the other black, both gleaming darkly.

A girl was shouting outside. "There's only the injured and nurses here. This is not a military base. Curse you Germans!"

Brian's mouth curved into a smile. "And Jupiter Roget, an authority from the Academy of Science, and Brian Roscoe, a magician lending his assistance," he added. "There's more. We also have old spies from the Ministry of the Occult who are trying to stop them. The young soldiers and nurses were the perfect cover for you."

The two old women inched closer, daggers at the ready.

Brian took a step back. Screams and explosions erupted outside. Young, angelic voices uttered curses.

"Anyone who helps the Academy of Science must be eliminated," the two Michelles said in their distinctive, raspy voice.

"My goodness. There were two Michelles all along? Not that I'm surprised. When a magician appears at two places at the same time, it's

usually twins. I sorta use the same trick. I know it's the most primitive illusion there is."

"We cannot let you live, Roscoe."

"But I didn't expect you to be spies. I mean, you're... too old."

"We..."

The two Michelles—old women in nurses' uniforms—drew ever closer. They had the same forlorn look on their faces as the woman praying outside the cemetery last night.

The ghost machine groaned.

A huge image of the Virgin Mary appeared in the night sky, towering far above the ground, her long hair hanging down over the purple sea. Girls on the beach exclaimed in joy.

"It's the Holy Mary!"

"Holy Mother!"

"Mary..."

The ghost machine continued groaning.

"You two played the same role," Brian said. "When I arrived, the woman who showed me the way was wearing a nurse's uniform, had long gray hair, and blue eyes."

"Yes." The blue-eyed Michelle nodded. "I'm Carmilla."

"I see. You were both using the same alias. That's why when I asked your name, you hesitated a bit before answering. And the next one I met, the one I asked to bring some paper, was the dark-eyed Michelle, wearing the same nurse's uniform, gray hair hanging down."

The dark-eyed Michelle nodded. "I'm Morella."

Upon closer look, the blue-eyed Michelle had a cut on her cheek, illuminated by the flames in the hearth.

Brian smirked. "You two hid the fact that you were twins and infiltrated the fortress as spies. You were the one who attacked me last night. I saw your blue eyes. And then later, I found you, the one with black eyes. Several people testified that you were in the infirmary the whole time."

"Yes."

"Yes."

They nodded at the same time. Slowly they approached Brian.

"I everywhere am thinking of thy blue eyes' sweet smile; A sea of blue thoughts is spreading over my heart the while. I should've known

when you recited that,” Brian muttered mockingly to himself.

He touched the magic lantern and fiddled with it.

“Tears!” cried a voice outside.

The image of the Virgin Mary began shedding rivers of tears. A waterfall of grief cascaded down into the dark purple sea. The two Michelles—the ministry’s spies, Carmilla and Morella—gripped their daggers tight as they neared Brian.

“Cursed, good-for-nothing Gray Wolf!”

“Young man with red hair unbefitting of a wolf, Brian Roscoe!”

“We are...”

“We are the descendants of those who believe in the occult.”

“Affiliated with Sauville’s Ministry of the Occult.”

“Loyal to our defender, Marquis Albert de Blois.”

“Good-for-nothing.”

“A half-human, switching to the science side.”

“Wretched Gray Wolf.”

Outside, several fighter planes plummeted into the dark sea. Some crashed on the beach, billowing black smoke. Others slammed into each other, spiraling downward. Soon, not a single fighter plane remained. Orange pillars of fire rose like beacons from the sandy beach, crackling.

Inside the room, Carmilla and Morella, daggers in hand, darted forward. Brian shifted his body, then elbowed Carmilla’s head. As she staggered, he wrested the dagger from her. Morella’s dagger grazed his arm, and blood seeped out. Brian’s eyebrows twitched.

He thrust the dagger toward Morella. The old lady leapt back with the agility that belied her age, and threw her dagger, aiming at Brian’s forehead.

Brian ducked at the last second. The dagger quivered as it dug into the wall behind him with incredible force.

Brian gasped and looked up. Cold sweat trickled down his forehead.

“Wh-Where did they go?”

The open door swung back and forth. Brian dashed into the corridor, but the two old women were no longer in the dark, spiraling labyrinth.

“Carmilla and Morella,” Brian murmured shakily. “Marquis de Blois’ minions.”

Slowly, he returned to the room. His knees were shaking. He couldn’t stop the cold sweat breaking out from his body. He recalled the time he

arrived at the monastery; the nice-looking old woman, blue-eyed Michelle, shuffling out. And the dark-eyed, mild-mannered Michelle who came down the corridor carrying a bundle of papers. A shiver ran through his spine.

“I’ll keep them in mind,” Brian muttered, and turned off the magic lantern.

The image of the weeping Virgin Mary vanished. On the beach lay bloody corpses of girls and the burning wreckage of fighter planes. Up above, stars dotted the night sky, twinkling for eternity.

Chapter 8: Rushing Water

The room where the guests were gathered gradually grew abuzz. Some whispered to each other, some frowned, some tried to leave with their luggage.

Kazuya got up from the suitcase to ask the nearest guest what was going on.

“It’s almost time for the train to arrive,” the guest said.

“Oh, I see.” Kazuya nodded. “But can we really just go? You know, with the deaths and all. There are no phones here, so they’ll have to take the train first to call the cops, and then come back and start an investigation.”

“And no one wants that so everyone’s freaking out. We came here for a weekend getaway. We don’t want to be stuck here too long. We have jobs and school on Monday.”

“Right...”

As soon as they were done talking, the guest rushed out into the corridor. Kazuya glanced back at Victorique, who was still sitting limply on the suitcase.

“Wait here a bit, Victorique. I’ll go check the situation outside.”

Victorique gave a weary nod, a small ceramic pipe in her glossy lips. Kazuya shuffled out into the corridor.

Guests streamed out of the rooms. Black-robed nuns struggled to hold them back.

Suddenly Kazuya’s ears caught an unfamiliar sound. Weaving against the throng of people, he slowly made his way up the spiraling corridor. The higher he went, the fewer the people, until only the occasional black-robed nun crossed the corridor, stepping out of one door and disappearing into another.

Kazuya stopped in front of a door.

A weird noise was coming from inside the room. Mixed in with that sound was a crackling, mechanical voice.

“Where’s the memento box?”

“I don’t know,” a man replied. His voice was familiar. “The she-wolf has not come. Where is Cordelia? I was certain she would come once she learned her daughter was here.”

“Is it still there?”

“I think so. Ah, why hasn’t my wife come? She’s not dead, is she?”

“No one has indeed seen your wife, Marquis de Blois.”

Kazuya’s breath seized. He grabbed the door knob and flung the door open.

Standing there was the old man he was with on the Old Masquerade.

A large, black communication device was sitting in the room. Perched in front of it was the green-eyed old man who said he was here to see his daughter.

But he was no longer an old man. His make-up had been wiped away, and there was only a middle-aged man, good-looking but with somewhat stern, forbidding features. He was wearing the same clothes, but there was no longer a stoop to his back; he stood taller. It was a peculiar transformation, almost as if he grew younger, going against the flow of time.

On either side of the man, real old women—the Fell sisters Carmilla and Morella—were standing on guard. Blue and black eyes stared warily at Kazuya.

“Huh, so there is a communications device here,” Kazuya said. “So we can call—”

“Call the cops, yes.” The man grinned. “But we can’t let others know about this machine. Having something so grand in a mere monastery will draw suspicion, Kazuya Kujou.”

Slowly the man stood up.

The chilling aura he emanated almost pushed Kazuya back, but he managed to stand his ground, barely. Fear gripped him. Not the kind of primordial fear he felt when he met the Gray Wolves Brian Roscoe and Cordellia Gallo, as if he were face to face with a huge predator. No. This fear was strangely quiet. There was hopelessness and cold resignation, like he was witnessing the end of the world.

Marquis de Blois, the man who called Cordelia his wife.

Kazuya's knees trembled. He couldn't believe it was the same old man who was casually conversing with him just a few hours ago.

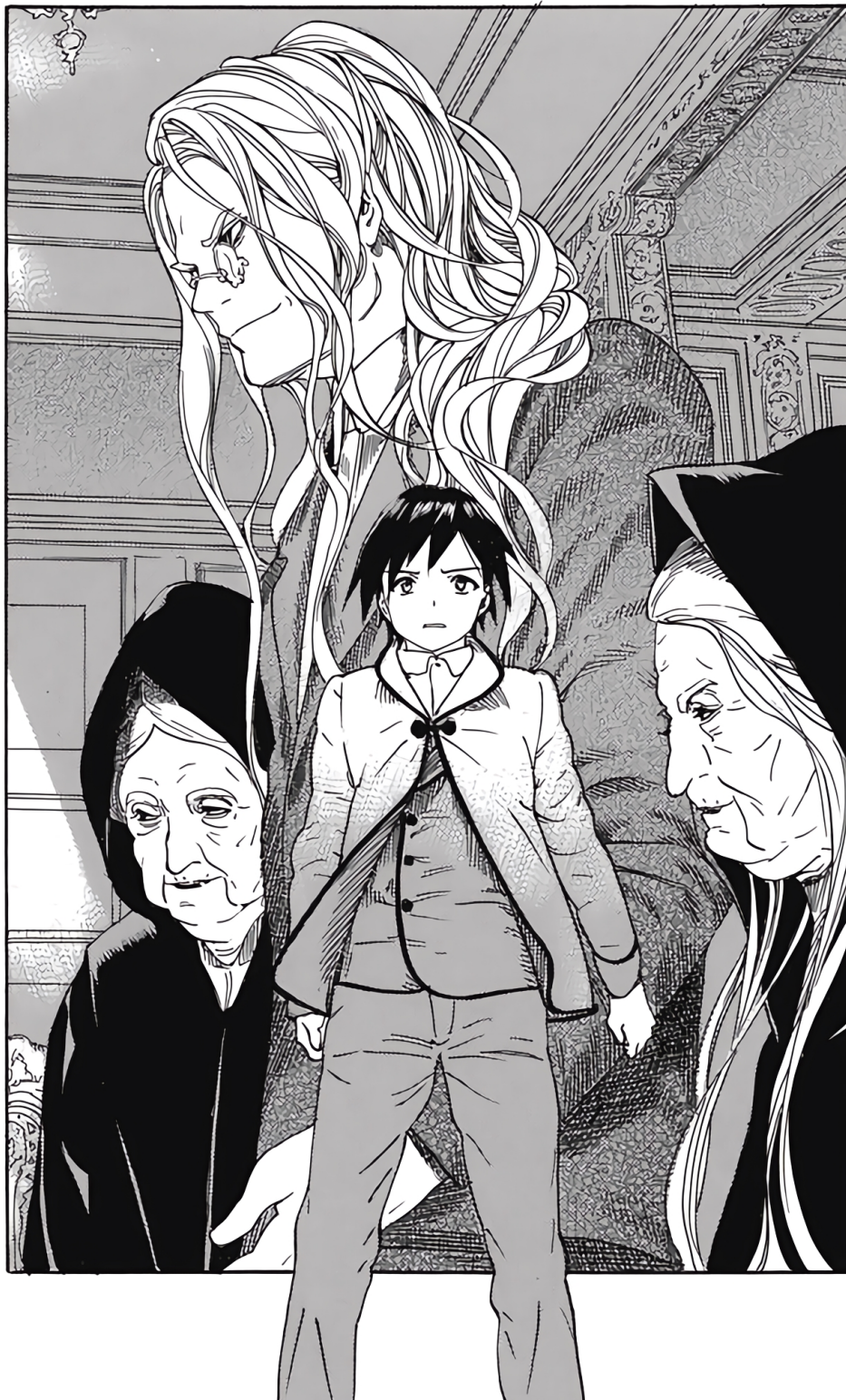
Marquis Albert de Blois... The legendary, mad leader of the Ministry of the Occult. Worked behind the scenes during the Great War, and captured a Gray Wolf wandering in the city.

His face turned paler.

And Victorique's father!

Marquis de Blois had already removed his gray wig. His long, blond hair had begun turning white in places. His stylish monocle made it so only one of his green eyes was magnified. He was staring fixedly at Kazuya.

The Fell sisters chuckled, distorting their wrinkly faces.



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“I believe this is the first time we meet, Kazuya Kujou,” the Marquis said.

“Yeah.”

“I honestly did not expect you to come this far for her. I assumed that her mother, Cordelia, would be coming on that train. So I disguised myself as an ordinary passenger. But the wolf never came. Instead you appeared, an odd oriental boy.”

“You transferred Victorique for your own selfish reasons and hurt her.”

“To achieve our goal,” the Marquis said coldly. “We need to find the memento box before Jupiter Roget does, and only those two wolves know where it’s hidden. It’s the key to bringing down the Academy of Science. And in the not-too-distant future, it will become a terrifying Pandora’s Box that will dictate the fate of the modernizing world. A forbidden box that must never be opened. I used the girl to try to lure the wolf.”

Kazuya bit his lip. “You hurt Victorique for your politics?”

“She’s my daughter. As her father, I can do whatever I want with her, no? Blood ties are of no importance to me. I only care about what’s good for the kingdom.”

Anger flared within Kazuya. The letter he received from his brother, the magazine articles, crossed his mind. Both contained the same message of putting the country before oneself, of striving to contribute for the betterment of his nation.

He reflected on himself and his actions. He came all the way here simply because he was worried about Victorique. He traveled far away not for the sake of his own country or some grand cause, but solely for a girl. As a man, as a soon-to-be adult, was what he did wrong?

Was it really important to live for some greater cause?

Or...

“She was born so I could use her as my tool,” Marquis de Blois murmured, his murky green eyes widening.

“But as Victorique’s father, you have a duty to love and protect her,” Kazuya replied in a low voice. “You are obliged to love her and protect her with your life.”

For a brief moment, Marquis de Blois looked stunned.

“What a surprise,” the Marquis remarked with a grin. “Is that an oriental ideology?”

“Being an oriental has nothing to do with it. You’re the monster, not Victorique. I’m... I’m bringing her back, and I’ll keep her safe.”

“Ah, to be young. Truly fascinating. But keep in mind, boy. The academy is under my control too.”

Marquis de Blois smiled bitterly. He stood up and headed to the door. The Fell sisters followed close.

“We’re leaving before the police arrive,” he said. “This place is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Occult, and the nuns are all under my command. But I can’t show myself to this country’s authorities. If it’s only the abbot and the nuns, they’ll assume it’s just an ordinary monastery.”

“What about those deaths? Simon Hunt and Friar Iago,” Kazuya murmured.

The Fell sisters turned at the same time. Their wrinkled, pale faces contorted into smiles.

“We...”

“...killed...”

“...those...”

“...two...”

“...together.”

“They were in the Marquis’ way.”

“But...”

“...no one will ever know about it.”

They closed their mouth simulatenously, then whirled back around and followed the Marquis down the corridor.

“What...?” Kazuya was left speechless. He dashed out into the corridor.

He heard a door close in the distance.

The corridor was empty, cold and quiet.

A different door opened, and a nun in black came out. Another one appeared and disappeared into a different door. Over and over, doors opened and closed.

Kazuya was left baffled. Then he hurried down the corridor, back to Victorique.

Kazuya sprinted through the spiraling labyrinth back to the room. The crowd had thinned out considerably. A large suitcase was sitting on its side in the corner.

On top of the suitcase, Victorique, wearing a red, torchon lace dress, silver boots, and a rose mini hat, was lying on her stomach, looking like a kitten bathing in the sun. Her body was still limp, and she was staring at him groggily. A thin wisp of smoke was rising from the ceramic pipe in her glossy, cherry lips.

Her green eyes were glassy, and her cheeks were puffed up.

“How do you feel?” Kazuya asked. “Still sluggish?”

Victorique grunted in response.

“Can you at least give a proper answer? By the way, I saw—”

Kazuya shut his mouth, then sat down beside Victorique.

He sighed. “I don’t know what’s more important. The individual or the country.”

“Dimwits like you shouldn’t think about things too much,” Victorique said. “You’ll only get dumber.”

“Good point... Wait, what did you say?!”

Victorique jerked like a kitten being scolded by its owner. Then she puffed up her cheeks in annoyance.

Kazuya looked around the room. “We should go outside too.”

Puffing on her pipe, Victorique gave a small nod.

With one hand pulling on the suitcase and the other holding Victorique’s hand, Kazuya started walking down the corridor. The further down the spiral corridor they went, the damper the floor became. Their footsteps echoed wetly. As they moved on further, water puddles became frequent, as though it was flooding. Victorique frowned.

“Victorique,” Kazuya called. “I, uhh...”

“Did you meet my father?” Victorique said.

Kazuya stopped in his tracks and looked at her.

Victorique sniffed audibly. “My Wellspring of Wisdom.”

“You knew he’d be here?”

“He had me transferred all the way here to lure my mother. I expected him to come in person.” She hung her head. “For him, I’m effective.” Her tiny shoulders were shaking.

Kazuya squeezed her hand tight and resumed walking. Victorique’s hand was cold, quivering faintly.

“Kujou.”

“Hmm?”

“Have you ever thought about why you were born?”

Kazuya was silent. Victorique did not say anything more either.

The corridor soon became so flooded that it was difficult to walk. Men who had waded back through the water shouted to Kazuya and Victorique.

“Bad news! They’re opening the sluice gate.”

“What? You mean that huge gate?!” Kazuya asked, shocked.

“Yeah. It’s slowly opening. I doubt you two could even walk down there. It’s too deep. We turned back ’cause it looked dangerous.”

“We should look for a window that’s facing higher ground,” another man added. “We’ll head to the station from there. This one’s a dead end.”

Kazuya turned around. Victorique was staring at the dark, submerged corridor, so Kazuya looked back. A guest’s suitcase was floating in the water. There was a hand mirror, a bag, a pair of men’s shoes that someone had taken off. Kazuya urged Victorique to start walking.

Kazuya opened one of the doors, found a window facing the coast, and peered down. The water had not yet reached this side of the monastery. A sandy beach stretched on under the dark night sky. In the distance, he could see the half-open sluice gate, the water rushing in. He threw the suitcase out the window before jumping down. He then climbed on top of the suitcase and reached out his hands to Victorique, who was tilting her head like a little bird at the window.

“Come on, Victorique.”

Fully trusting Kazuya, Victorique jumped down without hesitation. Red ruffles descended softly into Kazuya’s chest, the snow-white bloomers under her fluffy skirt, and her thin calves, wrapped in silk socks, glimmering briefly. Kazuya caught Victorique, light as a kitten, safely.

Kazuya held hands with Victorique and started running along the beach with the suitcase.

Rain was still falling from the dark night sky. From time to time, the full moon peeked through the clouds, making the raindrops sparkle. Waves rolled in and out from the purple sea. The rain pelted down on the surface of the sea, forming white foams.

Guests scattered on the beach were running toward the station platform in the distance, some holding umbrellas. Kazuya thought he could hear faint whistles in the distance. He listened carefully.

The train whistle, he realized.

The Old Masquerade had returned.

Its black frame rolled through the shimmering rain, cutting through the night. The whistle blew loudly. Again and again. The sea rumbled, churning huge waves in response. Over and over.

The peal of the whistle was coming closer.

A powerful vibration hit them.

The half-open sluice gate was shaking. The huge wall jerked, and slowly moved downward until the gate was completely open. The seawater billowed and came surging in toward the beach.

“The sluice gate!” someone shouted.

Kazuya’s breath caught in his throat. The water was rapidly closing in. Rain continued to fall.

“Someone touched the machine!” shouted a nun standing on the beach.

“It’s not supposed to be opened at high tide!”

Kazuya remembered the late Simon Hunt emerging from a mysterious room full of running machinery. It had seemed like he was doing something discreetly.

Was it him? Did he set the gate to open before he died? He probably thought he was going to leave alive. The gate opening right before the train arrives is too much of a coincidence.

Snapping back to reality, Kazuya gripped Victorique’s hand. The purple ring Cordelia gave him sparkled in her small finger. As they were running up the beach, Victorique’s legs tangled.

“Victorique!”

“Kujou...”

Victorique glanced down at her legs. She looked behind her.

The water was closing in.

The monastery they had just emerged from was being swallowed.

“I can’t run. I’m still feeling groggy.”

“I know! That’s why I’m pulling you.”

“Go on without me, Kujou.”

Kazuya huffed. Victorique’s head was slumped; she seemed dispirited.

“You know I can’t do that. I came here to pick you up.”

“But I...”

“Victorique...”

“How can I run for my life if I don’t even know why I was born?” She sounded uncharacteristically childish, her husky voice nowhere to be found.

Kazuya stood still. Suddenly he clenched his fist and made a motion of swinging it down on Victorique’s head. Victorique closed her eyes tight. Her lips quivered. Kazuya bent down to meet Victorique’s eyes, as one would with a child, and peered into her little face.

“Hey. This isn’t the time for nonsense,” Kazuya chided.

He glanced at the approaching water. Half of the guests were scrambling toward the station, the other half climbing to the top of the monastery for safety. Kazuya squeezed Victorique’s hand tight as they hurried to higher ground.

“Victorique.”

“What is it?”

“You’ve helped me before, and I’m here to help you. We are one of body and soul. I’m not going to run away alone. Live or die, we do it together.”

“Kujou...”

“I...”

Dark-purple water was fast approaching. The white foam. The light of the moon. The raindrops that kept on falling.

Kazuya let go of the suitcase and picked Victorique up with both arms. Victorique gasped in surprise. In Kazuya’s arms, the mysterious girl was light, like a weightless creature from heaven. Kazuya ran, scrambled across the sand. The rushing water was much faster than him.

Victorique was shaking in his arms like a wounded little bird.



“Although my situation’s a little different than yours,” he managed, “family matters have been bugging me a lot too. I talked to my father and brothers. We had differences in opinion. So I came here to study to broaden my horizons. I get stressed. I fret over things. Sometimes I feel lost. I’m only fifteen. The world is a big place. There’s a lot of things I don’t know, so I can’t come up with answers to questions most of the time. But when I met you, I learned one thing.”

The station was close now. Victorique looked behind them and gasped. Kazuya glanced over his shoulder as well and saw the large suitcase about to be swallowed by the waves, pulled into the depths of the purple sea. The water roared as it devoured everything in its path, swirling like the tongue of a giant monster, threatening to drag them both into its mouth.

“Don’t look,” Kazuya warned.

“O-Okay...”

“So I was saying,” Kazuya continued softly. “This might sound embarrassing. I know a man shouldn’t say this out loud. But I realized something. Whether you work hard for your country or not is not important, like my father and brothers keep on saying. I don’t know what kind of responsibility I will have when I grow up. But I believe it’s okay to strive for something important to you at the moment, even if it’s just for one girl. I’m starting to feel like I have a duty, a responsibility. A responsibility to protect you.”

“You’re so thickheaded,” Victorique bantered.

Kazuya went silent, a little peeved.

“Victorique,” he murmured. “I think it’s okay for you to feel the same. To feel that maybe you were born for someone. To meet someone important.”

Victorique did not answer.

Kazuya kept running. He heard Victorique snifle.

“Please... Please protect me,” she whispered in a husky voice that was almost inaudible.

A huge purple wave growled ominously behind them.

They reached the platform. The water level continued to rise. Women who had boarded the train earlier turned, saw them, shouted, and reached out their arms from the ramp. A girl with dark hair and blue eyes, and a

quiet-looking, middle-aged woman, the same women who were on the train with Kazuya on the way to Beelzebub's Skull. The girl pulled Victorique, while the woman pulled Kazuya up just before the waves could swallow them whole, holding them tight in relief.

The whistle blew.

The Old Masquerade began moving slowly, fleeing from the incoming water.

Guests scrambled onto the train. Noticing Victorique's wide-open eyes, Kazuya turned his attention outside.

The water, swirling and twisting like an eerie purple creature, engulfed the monastery. Rain continued to fall from the dark sky. The monastery, resembling the head of a fly, stood strong, glaring at the surging water.

"Beelzebub's Skull," Kazuya muttered. "A fortress cursed with death. Lord of the Flies."

Victorique squeezed Kazuya's hand. Her face was blank and expressionless.

"But we're alive," she said.

"Yeah..."

"Thanks to you, Kujou." Her voice was soft.

Kazuya silently squeezed Victorique's chubby hand back.

The whistle blew.

The Old Masquerade sped away from the flooded platform, as though taking off into the night sky.

—ghost machine 5—

December 11, 1914, Beelzebub's Skull.

The day after the Crashing of the Virgin Mary incident, which left an ominous mark on history, the sky was ironically clear and blue.

A young man, tall and slim, with green eyes and a mane of crimson hair, was standing at the entrance of the monastery with his luggage. He squinted at the morning sun reflected on the surface of the sea.

At his feet was a lone small baggage. He had left the magic lantern behind in the monastery. Jupiter Roget emerged from the building a moment later, and upon seeing Brian Roscoe, gave a nod.

"Splendid work," the middle-aged man said. "What you did last night will go down in the Academy of Science's history."

"I see," Brian replied briefly and looked away.

"I had no idea that the old nurse was a twin and a spy for the Ministry of the Occult. She worked hard for someone her age. I thought she was a perfectly fine character."

"I agree." Brian smiled thinly. "No one would assume an old woman to be a spy. We young people think that history is always made by the young."

"Right."

"And as time passes, they realize. Nothing has changed. Everything just repeats itself."

"Quite the cynic, are we?"

"Gray Wolves are cynical creatures. You're done checking my stuff, right? I'm leaving."

Jupiter jerked, and he gave a small smile. "So you knew."

"The Academy of Science is looking for the box that I was supposed to have brought back from the Nameless Village. If I had brought it to the monastery, you would have deduced that I would take it with me when I left. There's no way you wouldn't inspect my things before I left."

"In that case, I hope you don't mind a quick pat down."

At Jupiter's signal, a group of young employees from the Academy of Science stepped forward and passed their hands over Brian's clothes. Once they had confirmed that he was not concealing anything, they retreated away.

"Can I go now?" Brian said.

A train was slowly rolling to the station, a single platform in the distance. The steam whistle blew.

Brian started walking.

The locomotive drew nearer, billowing black smoke into the morning sky. Brian sauntered away from the stone monastery shaped like a giant fly's head.

"Hmph. Saw that coming from a mile away," Brian whispered to himself.

The dry, sandy beach was littered with the wreckage of German fighter planes, burnt, jet-black debris strewn eerily like huge animal bones. Brian glanced at them with a cold, emotionless gaze.

"I doubt I can retrieve the memento box anytime soon," Brian muttered. "Guess it's staying hidden in the room with the scarlet door for now. I'll get it back once the war is over. They might suspect something then, but I'm sure I can handle it."

"Brian," Jupiter Roget called. "You have a significant role to play in this war. The day will come when your skills will be needed once more. I will contact you then."

Brian looked over his shoulder and nodded.

The train stopped at the platform, spewing black smoke. Beelzebub's Skull was the last stop of the Old Masquerade's long journey. After arriving, the train would depart once more, running along the endless rail, carrying the thoughts of all sorts of people. Even during wartime, it kept on running.

Brian jumped onto the ramp.

The conductor slowly closed the train's steel doors.

Carrying only one passenger, Brian Roscoe, the Old Masquerade started its morning journey.

Epilogue: Bonds

The Old Masquerade was crowded. Guests who had managed to board the train stared vacantly at the purple water that consumed the ground as if it had a will of its own.

Amidst all the chaos, Kazuya and Victorique found a second-class compartment, furnished only with two small hard beds and a simple table. Victorique sat down on the bed.

An endless purple sea stretched outside. Heavy rain battered on the windows. The steam whistle rang high as the train rocked. The corridor was clamorous with the pattering of footsteps, angry roars, voices searching for others.

“So what on earth happened there?” Kazuya muttered to no one in particular.

“Would you like me to verbalize it?” asked Victorique, staring melancholically out the window.

“Yeah. Wait, you know what happened back there?”

“Of course.” Her voice sounded somewhat despondent.

Kazuya studied her face with concern. Victorique slapped his face like she was swatting an annoying fly.

“Ow! What was that for? I’m just worried, since you look down in the dumps. You’re such a—”

“This case involves the past, Kujou.”

“The past?” Kazuya stared at Victorique’s face.

He could not read her expression. It seemed like a mixture of quiet boredom, despair, and resignation, a mismatch for her lovely, doll-like features.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“The monastery—Beelzebub’s Skull—was used as a fortress by Sauville’s Academy of Science ten years ago, around the time of the Great War. The head of the Academy of Science, a man named Jupiter Roget, was the arch-enemy of my father, Albert de Blois, who led the Ministry of the

Occult. Unlike my father, who came from an aristocratic background and believed in the ancient powers, Jupiter Roget was a commoner, a man who believed in a new force, that is, science. The conflict between the Academy of Science and the Ministry of the Occult can be seen as a conflict between aristocrats who believe in the ancient powers and commoners who wish to climb the ranks using a new power.”

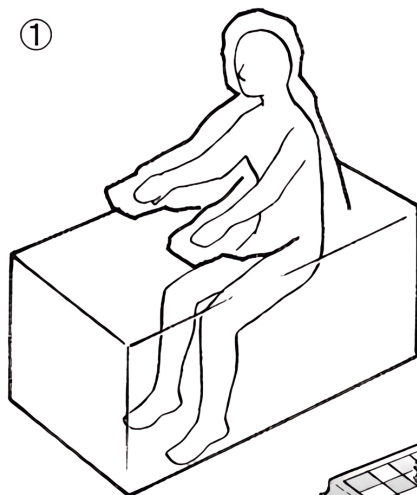
“Hmm...”

“There was one man who was said to have had strong ties to Jupiter Roget. His name was Brian Roscoe, the Gray Wolf magician. The blood of the old powers run in his veins, yet for some reason he cooperated with a man espousing the new power. Brian was also said to be working with the person Marquis de Blois was searching for, Cordelia, my mother. I believe she was using her small figure to assist Bryan in his magic tricks, while also hiding herself from her pursuers. Like how she was hiding in the Mechanical Turk.”

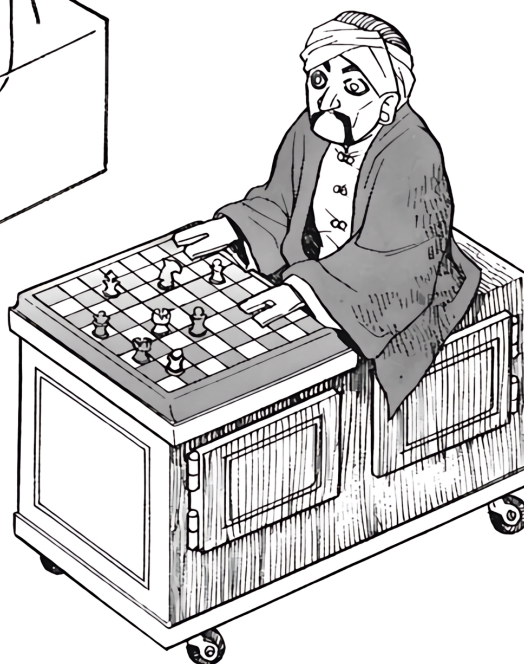
“What? You mean *the* Mechanical Turk?”

“You mentioned that the Mechanical Turk hit you on the train, and that you opened the box but found nothing inside. This is probably how it works.” Victorique drew a diagram on the fogged-up window with her small fingers. “When you opened the door on the left side, you saw a bunch of mechanisms, which I’m guessing were movable. At that point, Cordelia was hiding on the right side (3). And when you opened the door on the right side, she moved the mechanism there and hid on the left side (2). When operating the puppet, she inserts her upper body inside it. Hiding herself this way also allowed her to enter any place as luggage. Even in the enemy’s stronghold, Beelzebub’s Skull. You could say that the Mechanical Turk is a small, funny-looking version of the Trojan Horse. And when she left, she took advantage of the fact that I, her daughter who looked exactly like her, was in the same building, and pretended to be me, taking the memento box with her.”

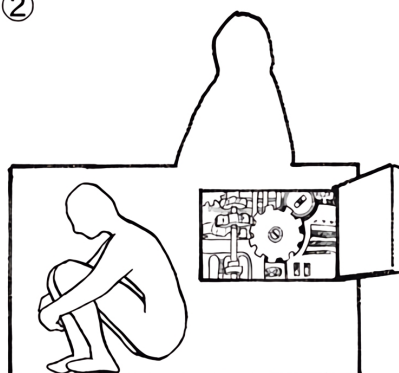
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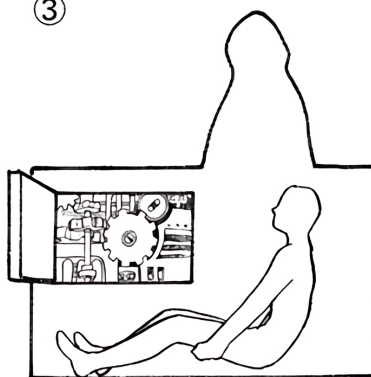
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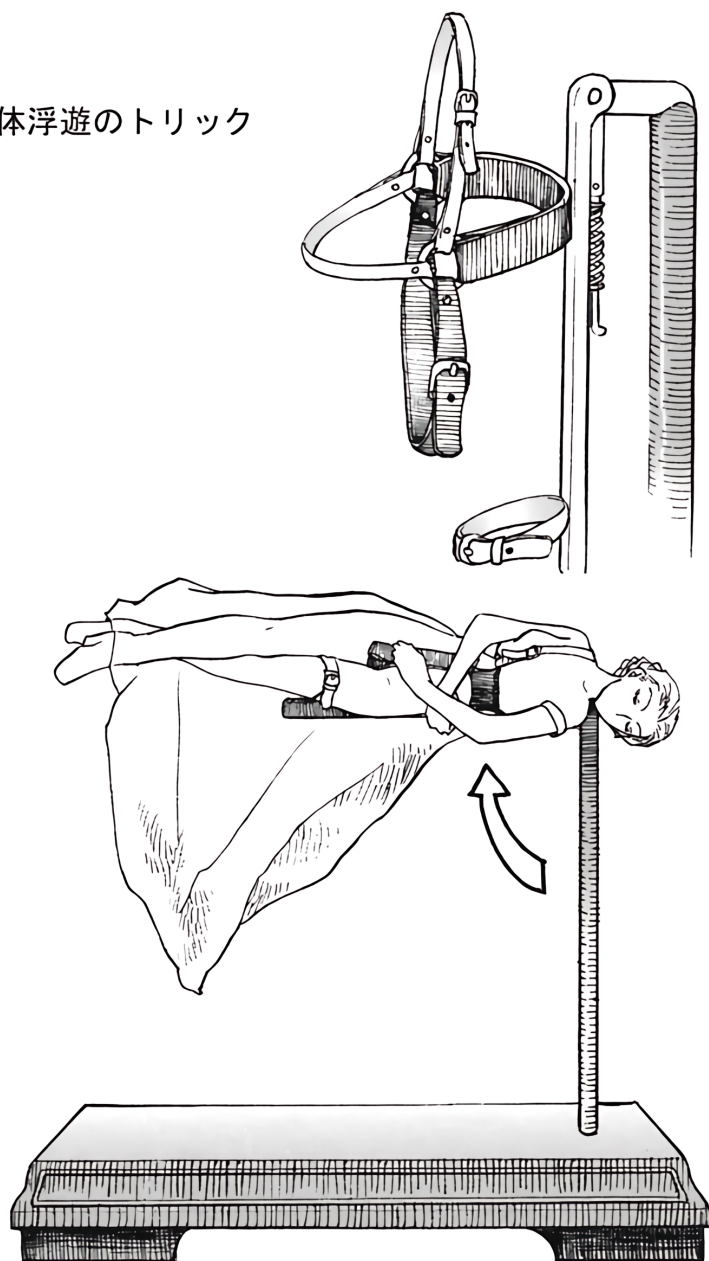
“So that’s how she did it,” Kazuya said, impressed.

“Now as for her partner, the other Gray Wolf, Brian Roscoe. He was working as a spy for the Academy of Science during the war.” Victorique smiled thinly. “Ah, but the irony. After the war, the Academy of Science relinquished control of the monastery, and the Ministry of the Occult started using it. As a monastery, on paper. However, the mysterious soirees held on nights of full moon, the Night of Phantasmagoria, are also events the Ministry of the Occult organizes to show off the old powers. They performed magic tricks and insisted they were genuine sorcery.”

The train rattled along.

“First, I will verbalize the various magic tricks that were performed at the soirée. The beautiful lady floating in the air had a pulley machine hidden behind her. Catching bullets with one’s teeth is even simpler. The woman used a fake bullet made of an alloy of tin and mercury. It’s indistinguishable from a real bullet at a glance, and it can be shattered with a mere poke. She handed a gun to a guest, and when they fired it, the fake bullet shattered into pieces. Then, she simply bites a bullet she’d been hiding inside her mouth and shows it to the guests. Silly tricks, really.”

人体浮遊のトリック



“I see...”

“Tonight, two men attended the fraudulent soiree. One was a government official, Simon Hunt, and the other was Iago, a friar from the Vatican.”

“Both were killed.”

“Yes. Let’s start with Simon Hunt, the first victim. You said he was skeptical about supernatural magic and the old powers. When he fixed your clock, he told you that it was his job to see through illusions disguised as sorcery. And he was a government official. These fragments of chaos finally allowed me to reconstruct a tiny fact. I believe Simon Hunt was a member of the Academy of Science.”

“Really?”

Victorique nodded. “Most likely. To the phony magicians of today who claim that their tricks and illusions are legitimate sorcery, the Academy of Science is an enemy. They want the country to flourish through science and eradicate spiritual culture. Now the question is, why did he come to Beelzebub’s Skull, hiding his identity? What’s more, he came on the Night of Phantasmagoria, which is held only once a month. It can’t be a coincidence. Did he have some sort of mission? If he did, what was it about? What business does the Academy of Science have in Beelzebub’s Skull?”

“...”

“I have not yet solved this mystery. Perhaps what he said about searching for a memento box and my mother’s words ‘One of the Academy of Science’s greatest secrets lie hidden in this box’ are fragments that will solve the mystery. Now the question is: what is this memento box?”

Victorique clenched her small fists and swung them around in frustration.

The clouds parted a little, and the reflection of the full moon, pale and sinister, undulated with the waves.

“Anyway, Simon Hunt was a spy from the Academy of Science sent to infiltrate the Ministry of the Occult’s fortress. After finding the memento box, he rigged the sluice gate to open right as the train arrived, probably with the intention of escaping safely. But his cover was blown and he was killed by the Ministry’s assassins, the Fell sisters.”

“But how did they do it? Morella’s and Simon’s hands were tied, and no one else was inside the cabinet.”

Victorique frowned. Suddenly, the door to their compartment opened and someone tried to enter. Kazuya looked up and saw two familiar women standing there—a girl with dark hair and blue eyes, and a middle-aged woman. He had exchanged a few words with them on the way to Beelzebub’s Skull, and they also helped them board the train when they left. The two women looked surprised.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize there were people inside.”

“I was looking for an empty compartment. I wanted to sit down.”

Kazuya stood up and politely offered the bed he was sitting on. “You can take my seat.”

“I can’t possibly...”

The women exchanged looks.

“Perfect timing,” Victorique said.

“Hmm? Did you say something, Victorique?”

“I did.” Victorique untied the red satin ribbon on her mini hat. “You came at the right time. I can demonstrate the slip knot.” She stood up and sat the women down facing each other.

“Is something happening, little Mademoiselle?” the middle-aged said, smiling.

Victorique frowned in annoyance.

“You can’t call her little,” Kazuya whispered. “Or grumpy, or crybaby, or mean. She gets mad when you tell her the truth.”

“Shut up, you dimwit.”

“What are you doing, though?” he asked.

“I’m going to show how that silly Sisters’ Cabinet works so even a simpleton like you can understand.”

Victorique gave a series of low grunts as she tied both women’s wrists tightly together with the satin ribbon.

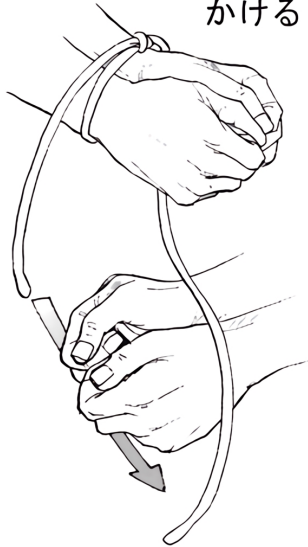
“Try pulling your hands,” she instructed.

The women exchanged glances, then pulled their hands to the side.

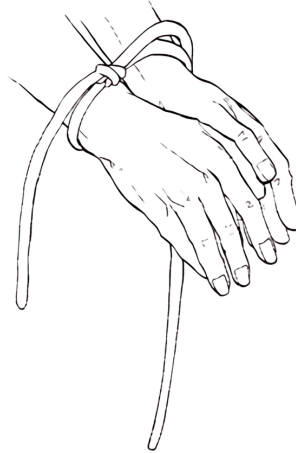
The ribbon unraveled and fell to the floor. Kazuya quickly picked it up. He then stood next to Victorique and looped the ribbon through her red mini hat, tying it tightly under her chin.

Victorique shooed him aside. “That was called a slip knot,” she said. “It looks like a tight knot at first glance, but it quickly unravels. A magic trick.”

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かける



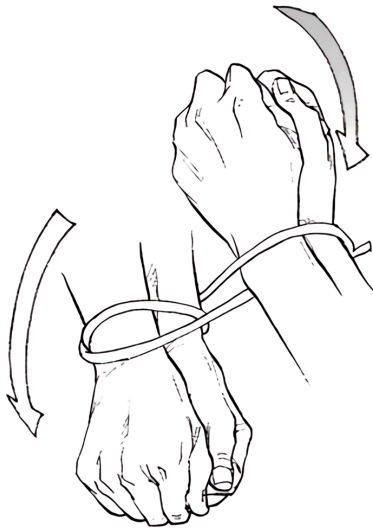
①1人目の手首を合わせて
結びつける



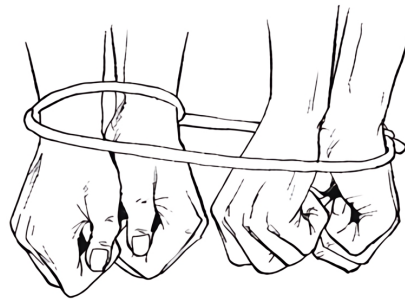
③ロープを結ぶ



④縛られた2つの手首を
ねじると隙間ができる



⑤このようにすれば抜ける
逆にひねれば③に戻る



“Oh, I see,” Kazuya breathed. “So the one who killed Simon Hunt was...”

“It could only be Morella, the old woman who entered the cabinet with him. Killing him in public using alleged sorcery was probably their way of challenging the Academy of Science. But they failed to realize that Simon Hunt had tinkered with the mechanism operating the sluice gate before he was killed. Both sides were engaged in a game of deception.”

Kazuya was silent, deep in thought. The two women looked at each other, wondering what was going on.

“I imagine that Iago the Vatican Friar was killed for the interest of the Ministry. He was summoned to certify miracles, but he saw that the show was nothing but a sham. He planned to report it when he returned to the Vatican. But the Ministry wouldn’t allow it. They needed the official certification. If Iago reported their fraudulent activities, there would be dire consequences. So they staged Iago to die a strange death in full view of the public. Make it look like he was killed using sorcery. Just like Simon Hunt.”

“How on earth did they do it, then?” Kazuya asked. “Where did the strange man in black go?”

“There was never a man in black.” Victorique smirked. “Do you remember the big square machine in the monastery? The magic lantern.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s a device used in magic tricks. Known also as a ghost machine, it projects skeletons, apparitions, and various other things on the stage. They probably used it during the show. I’m guessing that the historical incident at the monastery that happened ten years ago, the Crashing of the Virgin Mary, was a monumental deception concocted by the magician, or rather, an extraordinary blockhead, Brian Roscoe, with the use of a ghost machine.”

“Wait, you mean the incident where a giant image of Mary appeared in the night sky, shedding rivers of tears, and causing German fighter planes to crash?”

“Yes. That blockhead buttered up with the Academy of Science by using magic tricks in war. He projected an image from a magic lantern into the night sky and made the apparition of Mary shed tears. It’s not some mysterious phenomena, or a ghost, or a miracle. It was simply an illusion.”

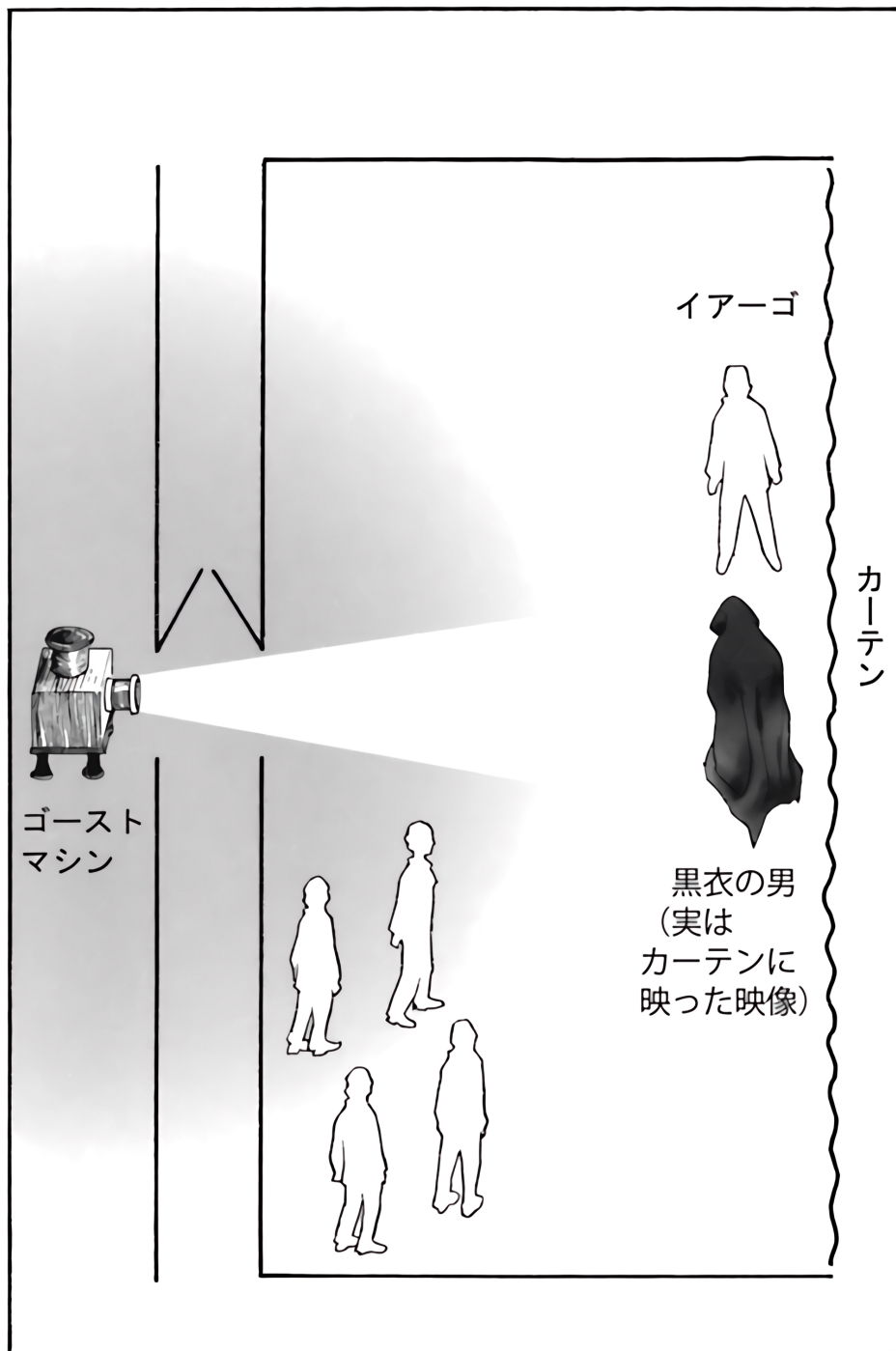
“No way...”

“And ten years later, the same device was used to kill Friar Iago. He was killed by none other than Carmilla, the older sister. There was poison in the water she gave him. What appeared to enter the room and kill Iago was an illusion created by the magic lantern, a black ghost.”

Victorique yawned boredly.

“How did they do it?” Kazuya asked, surprised.

“The door was open at the time. They probably placed the lantern in the opposite room and projected a ghost toward Iago, who was standing in the direct line of the door, as soon as he started groaning in pain. When he collapsed, they turned the device off and closed the door to the other room. Do you remember? There was a sound of a door closing back then.”



“Yeah.” Kazuya nodded. He looked a little puzzled. “You knew all along, didn’t you? As soon as the incident happened. Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I, uhh...” Victorique cast her eyes down. “I solved the mystery now because of my mother’s message. She said to demonstrate my power. I kept quiet until now, because...”

Her rosy cheeks turned a little red. As always, she was wearing a quiet and bored expression, but a hint of vigor flashed across her delicate, doll-like features.

“I told you before,” she said.

“Told me what?”

“I will get you back to the academy safely. I can’t put you in danger. If I revealed the truth then and there, you would have been targeted. The entire monastery is under the control of the Ministry. Put it another way, the entirety of Beelzebub’s Skill was the culprit.”

After a few moments of silence, Kazuya nodded. “I see. Thanks, Victorique.”

Victorique snorted in response and turned her face away. Kazuya stared at her tiny head for a while, and smiled faintly.

The Old Masquerade kept running through the stormy night.

Sensing that the two had finished talking, the older, quiet-looking woman said, “Ah, so that’s what happened.”

Kazuya turned and saw the two women staring at them.

“My, what a brilliant little girl,” the older woman remarked.

“I believe in the supernatural,” the girl muttered. “I’d like to think what happened was a miracle.”

The door opened once again, admitting two men.

“Oh, there’s people here too.”

“Oh, well. Let’s just sit in the corridor, then. I brought playing cards with me.”

They both turned to leave, when the middle-aged woman stopped them.

“There’s some space here if you like.”

“Ah, thank you kindly.”

The first man entered the compartment and sat on the corner of the bed, looking grateful. He looked to be about thirty, with a body as big as a hill.

The other entered next, a young man of smaller build, a little over twenty years old. The latter was good-looking, dressed stylishly like the son of an aristocrat. The larger man, on the other hand, gave the impression of a laborer, with his large, burly hands, a sturdy leather vest, and dirt-stained boots.

“Rough night, huh?” said the young man, eyeing everyone present with a smile on his face.

“Yeah,” Kazuya nodded.

The large man pulled a deck of cards from the pocket of his vest. “How about we all introduce ourselves?” he said. “My, what a lovely young lady we have here. How old are you?”

“A hundred and fourteen years old,” Victorique said in a low voice, like the calm before a storm.

Kazuya stifled a laugh. The large man blinked.

Plop!

Something fell on the floor. Everyone’s eyes fell downward.

A small, red box was lying there.

The air seemed to freeze.

“Oops.”

The woman who dropped the box smiled, picked it up, and put it back in her pocket. For a while, the only sound in the compartment was the shuffling of cards.

The train’s whistle blew.

Another violent storm was raging outside.

It was a strange, portentous night.

Shuffling the cards, the large man said, “Now, then. Let’s introduce ourselves, shall we?”

—wiretap radio 4—

Bzzzt.

Beep.

“The... The...”

“The...”

“The memento box...”

“The memento box has been taken. It’s on this train right now.”

“Retrieve it.”

“Retrieve it.”

“Retrieve it.”

“Understood.”

“Retrieve it from that woman at all costs.”

Prologue II: A Small Red

“So far, I get it. But...”

A tall brick building in the center of Saubreme, the capital of the kingdom of Sauville.

Fronting Charles de Gillet station, a modern structure made of black iron and transparent glass, was a huge intersection where black cars and carriages sped past. A sophisticated noblewoman with a parasol was sauntering along the pavement with a gentleman. Glamorous display windows were filled with dresses, hats, and shiny ladies’ shoes, showcasing Europe’s prosperity to the fullest. But on the street crouched a street urchin, face blackened with dirt, waiting for passersby to toss coins with dark, vacant eyes.

The light and darkness of the city. Modernization and ancient culture. Morning in Saubreme, where two forces clashed.

In a large room on the fourth floor of the police station, a man folded his arms and spoke.

“Everything before that, I understand. But...”

He was leaning against the wall, striking a pose like an impeccable beau. Silver cufflinks adorned his well-tailored suit. His leather shoes were polished to a shine, and he wore a sparkling silver choker around his neck, his silk shirt slightly exposed.

His hair, a dazzling golden color, was protruding forward like a cannon. In his arm was an expensive-looking porcelain doll, fluffy with white-and-black lace and frills. His other hand was stroking the doll’s curly hair. The man—an illustrious officer in the Saubreme Police, famed inspector Grevil de Blois—turned to the small boy standing before him.

“But I don’t follow, Kujou.”

“Like I’ve been saying,” the boy, Kazuya Kujou, replied calmly. “Last night, we escaped from the water pouring in through the sluice gate that Simon Hunt had opened and got on the transcontinental train, the Old Masquerade, just in the nick of time.”

“I get all that. But...”

The inspector shot a bitter glance at the person next to Kazuya Kujou. She was sitting like a propped-up broken doll, her magnificent golden hair hanging down to the floor like an untied turban. Smoking a pipe, she shifted a little and turned her face away, her face the picture of indifference. The inspector’s terrifying sister, Victorique de Blois.

Inspector Blois pulled his eyes away from his sister and turned his attention back to Kazuya Kujou.

“Why did a murder take place on the train?” he asked. “How was the woman killed? Who’s the culprit?”

“...”

“Start from the beginning, Kujou.”

Inspector Blois brought his face close to Kazuya. The boy took a step back, saving himself from the drill.

“I can explain what happened,” Kazuya said, glancing at Victorique, who was adamant on ignoring them.

“Start talking, then. The department has tasked me with handling the Old Masquerade case.”

“But we’ll have to start from when we boarded the train and introduced ourselves,” Kazuya began.

The officers around were fervently taking notes.

“The victim had a small, mysterious red box with her.”

To be continued...



Gosick - Volume 05

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Translated by [Light Novels Translations](#)
